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ISTER'S GROVE

MARION HILL

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McALLISTER'S GROVE

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"Mr. *Laurence* McAllister?" asked Hopkins.

[PAGE 14]

McALLISTER'S GROVE

By MARION HILL

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THOMAS FOGARTY

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NEW YORK 1917

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TO

DR. MARY B. J.

McALLISTER'S GROVE

CHAPTER I

TAMELY to state that the sun was shining hotly upon the boat landing at Perseverance City (*city!*) does not even begin to express an idea of the blazing, panting, almost shriveling radiance which poured over it and over the rest of central Florida that unwinking September noon.

The placidly rotting wharf, which seemed more to be tumbling into the river than rearing out of it, actually gave forth a charred smell—as if it intended to break into a flame presently—a warm, piney, sociable smell. "Heat's healthy and it's free" was the suggestion thrown broadcast.

In spite of hosts of queer trees, nowhere was there a shadow. For the palmettos—not being even umbrellas but only umbrella-skeletons—did not cast more of a shade than a skeleton would decently be supposed to cast, and the pine trees poled themselves so gauntly high in the air before condescending to stick out their bare pins of leaves that such shadow as *they* cast became all hopelessly mixed up with the scorching sunlight again before it ultimately reached the ground.

For a positive fact, the gasoline tank of the "General Store," that was hitched, either for society or support, to the back of the wharf, far excelled the tropical shrubbery in shade-casting ability, as a thankful,

loosely put together pig-mother of eight restless pig-babies, all wallowing at the tank's base in grunting contentment, plainly testified.

Take it all in all, the site and sight of Perseverance City—and by the time the title had covered the wharf, store, and prospective pork, its work was wholly over—were not as attractive advertisements for Seminole County as the county really deserves. Except for the glare there was nothing else to attract an observer's attention but a few straggling, writhing roads of sand that was whiter and deader than table salt. The unworthiest thing about Seminole County is its wasteful habit of having half a dozen poor roads all gregariously rambling together to one place.

Just at present the land's life, its breeze, was having a stuffy fit of sulks, and nothing in sight moved, not even those usually swaying cobwebs of the Florida forest, the funereally streaming moss which the stark pines held up by every maimed arm they owned. Lest the uninitiated associate any idea of cool greenness with this moss, let them be told at once that it is as gray and dry as kitchen sage. It hangs from the trees in dismal festoons of untidiness, looking like mildewed excelsior pitched down from Olympus by the gods after royal unpacking day.

A prodigal array of palms palisaded both sides of the river, sticking up stiffly like vegetable feather dusters, exactly as if they too had been pitched out by the gods and had landed handle-end down. The few of them that had not been thrown straight and lurched tipsily sideways, growing at right-angles to the scenery, had the eminently appropriate appearance of being in the act of swooning from sunstroke.

To sum up the locality, this drowsing part of pros-

trate Florida now happened to be lying as inert in the sunlight as one of her own alligators, further copying that home saurian by keeping her main eye warily open for live bait, looking to the river to bring it.

And down the picturesque kinks of the St. John's the live bait came, borne on the decks of a stern wheel steamer, built quite after the pattern of the razor-backed hog, and that is squat and thin and high, so that it could nose around new curves in the narrow flood without bumping its rear disastrously against the curve just left.

The live bait? Why, questing northerners! Some of them were wealthy, hunting health; some were healthy, hunting wealth; some of them were healthy and wealthy, hunting for fun. And it is only fair to lazy, lovely Florida to say that they all had good chances to find what they sought.

There were many people on the boat, but this tale concerns itself with only two of them—old Andrew McAllister and his granddaughter, Annie Laurie. To her credit be it announced at once that she had cut off the sentimental first and endeavored to be known as Laurie. There ought to be a special hearth in hell set apart for the roasting of reckless christeners; and perhaps there is.

Spurred by a noble desire to offset the sins of her godparents, Laurie McAllister was always trying to stamp poetry out of her system, and just at present she was at that stage in her endeavor when she honestly wanted men to treat her like a man. Since she was pretty and feminine to a degree, this stage made her a fearful sapper of the bachelor resolve.

"Did you ever in your life see anything *grander?*" she was now demanding of space.

"Than what?" counter-demanded Andrew, royally testy.

To stand in a crowd on the deck of a boat and be vulgarly bumped by his fellow men violated his conception of what was everywhere due a McAllister. And, truly, his unalterable majesty of mien, coupled with the majesty of his many years, gave him the air of being on a plane high above average humanity. Not to be irreverent, he looked like a pope on a picnic.

"Than this river," explained the girl. "Every twist in it is divine. You think there can't possibly be a nook prettier than the one you're leaving, then before you know it you're in one. Look at the ferns everywhere! Real florist's ferns—the kind that you generally have to pay dollars for and bring home in a pot and watch die! And the palms, making you think of dates and coconuts and caliphs and 'The Arabian Nights!' And, best of all, you don't have to go abroad for it, but have it right here at home! Oh, I'm so glad I'm an American!"

"Which is precisely what you are not!" rapped out old Andrew McAllister, unfeignedly angered.

"When I was born in nice old New York?" wheedled Laurie insinuatingly.

"To be born in a stable does not make you a horse," he said, with the triumphant tone of being the originator of that senile proverb.

"N—no," murmured Laurie, not with conviction, however. "Yet if you are born in a Harlem flat you are not extremely likely to be a cow. That saw cuts both ways, grandpa. My mother was an American."

"Only till she married my son, your father!"

"And that made her British?" asked Laurie, demurely.

"Scotch!" quite hissed her grandfather. To him

there was no joke about it anywhere. Upon the other side he was still referred to as "The" McAllister. What wonder that upon his sensitive old ears the scattering term "British" fell insultingly short of the mark? And oh, the woe when a careless, uninformed American chanced to mention him to his face as "English"! English? Red rag to a bull! Scotch, I tell you.

"Be all as it may, I don't feel Scotch," settled Laurie, gently. "I was born in New York—New York gave me a mighty good education free, and New York's money has been feeding me and mine for years. Now Florida is going to relieve her of the task—*I hope!*"

This last was said so low as to pass unheard.

Imperceptibly the razor-backed boat had slowed down; now, grunting, it poked its snout towards the wharf of Perseverance City, rooting ruthlessly through rafts of water hyacinth, a lovely, lilac-colored flower that covered the river like a carpet. From the paddle wheels, munched green leaves and scrunched blossoms dripped in tons, almost stopping progress.

And now the first signs of human life appeared on the rotting landing. Three fat, half-clad negro men came from the wharf shed and began to do comic and entirely unnecessary things with the tie ropes, spurred thereunto by the hope of coaxing dimes out of the tourists who hung over the deck rail in flattering mass.

In order to furnish more paying vaudeville the negroes burst into song, a medley that was very musical in spite of being commercial.

"Oh, Ah see ma Sally Ann a-comin' todes me on de jump.
Sing Juba, pat Juba!
Tie her, nigger! Hol' her hard-fas' so de white folks git no bump
Sing Juba, pat Juba!"

On the boat the passenger gang plank was being fussed with.

"Who on earth is fool enough to land at this jumping off place?" ringingly asked a tourist. He was a boy, and was from New England—a combination of circumstances which inclined him to feel that the sensibilities of his fellow creatures decreased as the distance between himself and his home increased.

"*I* am fool enough!" cried Laurie, goaded to the accident of speech. She pointed almost triumphantly to the bags and satchels around her feet, sure indications of a near disembarkment.

"Beg pardon," stammered New England, contritely snatching off his cap. "Really I didn't know you lived here!"

"I don't," confided Laurie, with an extremely dubious glance at the sizzling wharf, "but I'm going to." Then with a gently millionaire-ish tone, she added, "I've bought a grove here."

"Here?" The lad was looking at the gasoline tank and the pigs.

"Here."

"Where?" His glance jumped over the pigs and traveled one of the salty roads to nothingness.

"I don't know," she confessed, busily loading herself down with the satchels, noticing that the boat was now tied.

"Bought without ever seeing?"

New England's amazement was a credit to his caution. Indeed it was sufficient to do credit to the entire Atlantic Coast.

"I—I purchased it on reputable advisement," stated Laurie, straightening up under the encouragement of her masculine-sounding vocabulary. "Now, grandpa,"

she said cheerily to the old man, who had become quite helpless by reason of his too nervous desire to be helpful, "take my arm and trust me to get you down all right."

"But the satchels!" he fumed, dropping his own in order to clutch the young girl's arm. "Do they imagine us to be barnyard fowls?" he hissed, viewing the plank with hectic displeasure.

"Never mind the satchels; I have two of them and will run back for the others. Come, dear."

"On no account permit me to slip," charged The McAllister, tightening his clutch upon her arm as he felt the gang plank sway beneath him.

"Never a slip, grandpa," she promised patiently, quite used to being made responsible for his every move. "Hang on. Be a kiltie, mon. Just a few more steps, dear. There you are!" this last as she landed him, safe but trembling, upon the wharf. "Now I'll go back for your bags."

But when she turned she collided with them, for penitent New England had carried them down for her, hurrying back aboard ship to escape thanks.

"Tch!" choked and spluttered Andrew McAllister, who made a point of refusing to admit that little girls grew up. "There is always some man or another dancing attendance upon you, Annie Laurie!"

"I fancy we have come to the final end of men and their dancing, don't you, grandpa?" she asked thoughtfully, after turning herself completely around—like a storm door—and establishing the fact of their complete isolation. "Two *Crusoes* and no *Friday!*"

Their trunks and a few crated household odds and ends had been hurled recklessly from the vessel's hold,

and now huddled dismally one against the other in the center of the landing, a sorry monument of shabbiness. The sun traveled over them gaily, poking a merciless finger into all their venerable dents and gashes. "Somebody's dump heap," the dancing rays seemed to announce.

Giving a long-drawn-out howl of delight at being able to leave Perseverance City the steamer shoved from the dock, and Laurie looked after it with a suddenly sinking heart. A few minutes before it had been a boat and *only* a boat, now—paddling inexorably away up-stream—it stood for the vanishing benefits of civilization, friends, music, theaters, hot baths, telephone, telegraph, caramels, and deviled crabs. What was left behind was merely heat, glare, silence. And such eye-wearying glare, such blanketing heat, such far-reaching silence!

Andrew McAllister sat on a trunk, put both his hands on the knob of his cane, pursed his lips very papally, and noddled around him with growing sternness. Even the negroes were gone, it having taken the united efforts of all three to trundle one small cheese box to the store.

"Everything will come out right, grandpa," said the girl hurriedly, as she put a reassuring and tenderly protective hand upon his shoulder.

Why shouldn't things "come out right"? For she had not made this tremendously upsetting move without long deliberation.

Her mind galloped back over the happenings of the near past. True, she had done exactly as she had confessed to New England—had bought an orange grove, unseen, like a pig in a poke. Worse, she had spent her entire savings upon it, keeping only a very

few dollars indeed for daily expenses until the fruit crop could be sold.

This advertised crop is what had tempted her in the first place and had decided her in the last; for the real estate agents at Perseverance City had written her that the capacity of the trees was twenty boxes apiece. The grove had about five hundred trees. Oranges were selling at four dollars a box in New York city.

Laurie McAllister had sharpened a pencil, taken a piece of paper, and had done some figuring. Then she told herself she would have been not only cowardly but criminal to hesitate. First and foremost, her grandfather was each year suffering more and more from the northern winters. Suppose she remained in New York and he fell so ill that she, being obliged to nurse him, could no longer go on earning sustenance for them, what then? Why, the savings would have gone anyhow, and afterwards . . . the poorhouse.

On the other hand, twenty boxes multiplied by five hundred is ten thousand boxes. There was no getting around that. Figures do not lie. And four dollars, the price of one box, multiplied by ten thousand is forty thousand dollars. She permitted herself one mad moment to visualize the whole sum in figures—$40,000! This of course she *knew* to be mad. She was merely temporarily indulging herself, tasting of the delights of the poet who wrote: "How mad and bad and sad it was, but oh, how it was sweet!"

Then, having been conscientiously bred to remember the fate of the exasperatingly sanguine young woman in the school readers who counted her chickens before they were hatched, Laurie made deductions on account of the boxes of oranges that might fail to hatch, so to

speak. Suppose that only half the trees bore, and that the price of oranges fell with a soul-harrowing bang—say to only fifty per cent of the present price? What would multiplication have to say to that?

Twenty times two hundred and fifty times two is ten thousand. Ten thousand dollars. Even after she had provided calamities with a liberal hand she felt that the results were still too good to be true. So she chopped off fifty more per cent just on general principles. By that time the income was modest enough for her to dare look it in the face, yet large enough to set her dizzy with relief and delight.

To think of five thousand dollars a year rolling in for years to come!

"I feel like the countryman who stared at a live giraffe in a circus for a full half-hour, and then walked away muttering, 'I don't believe thar ain't no sech an animile!'" said Laurie to herself, again logically reaching the five thousand dollars, and this time from the vantage point of the Promised Land itself.

But where were the orange groves? This she wondered as she peered across the river and up the river and down the river, discovering only more palms and more pines and more stretches of hot sand. As for a house or even a roof, absolutely nothing of the sort was visible. Silence had settled down tight as a pot lid. Once in a while the dreamy lap of the water would break it startlingly. Occasionally, too, there came to the ear a peculiarly rasping creak.

"Someone should oil that wagon wheel," said The McAllister, clutching the knob of his cane severely.

"I don't think it's a wagon wheel; I think it's a bird," ventured Laurie, who had caught sight of an hysterically bobbing medley of blue on a near-by pine.

"Are you endeavoring to suggest to me that my silvered locks have addled my brains to the extent of rendering them incapable of differentiating between an axle and a feathered biped?" asked The McAllister.

When he turned himself into a thesaurus of English words he was on the verge of what Laurie Americanized as a "double cat-fit."

She pointed out the blue jay, which vindicated her by ruffling its throat and singing a few notes sounding like the old oaken bucket getting cranked up to the top of the well.

The McAllister's glance at it was fierce enough to have killed the warbler where it perched.

"I might have known better than to expect the proximity of anything human," scathingly meditated the old gentleman, throttling the neck of his cane instead of fondling the knob.

The girl gnawed her soft red lip anxiously and scanned the quivering horizon.

"He is an inexcusably dilatory individual," observed the thesaurus.

"That's what he is, grandpa," she admitted. "He said he would be here to meet the boat."

"Which man is coming?" he asked. "*Bid*dle or *Hop*kins?" He bit off the first syllables and flung them from him as if asking, "Scum or dregs?"

"Biddle and Hopkins" formed the name of the real estate firm from which the grove had been purchased.

"I don't know which, grandpa," the grove owner confessed. "He always signed himself by the two names. Look! Maybe that puff of dust is he."

As she pointed to the puff of dust it resolved itself into an approaching automobile. This automobile was coming so quickly down one of the sandy bad roads

that it hopped from side to side with the light and nonchalant sprightliness of a gazelle.

"God bless my soul," devoutly murmured The McAllister, in comment upon this semi-aviation.

Not only was the machine of an unanchorable disposition, being half tin, but the roads in addition to being sandy owned the kinks of a piece of crimped wire. All Florida roads connecting places a mile apart measure three miles in length; for every time a road comes to a pine tree it politely turns out and goes round. To quote Cal Tandy, "A Floridy highway 'ud break a snaik's back a-follerin' hit."

But there is no use bringing in Cal Tandy before he belongs.

To return to Mr. Biddle and Hopkins: that gentleman—one of him at any rate—raced his machine through the wharf shed on to the wharf, stopped just short of skipping into the water, then adroitly and miraculously turned his conveyance around in a space no wider than a kitten would need in which to chase an especially lively tail.

This hair-raising feat accomplished, the motorist cut off his engine, leaned back in his seat for a well-earned rest, and, after glancing skimmingly over the old man and the girl, proceeded to look around him as if searching for someone else.

After a period of indecision, Laurie detached herself from her sweltering lares and penates and ventured to the side of the car.

"Are—are you looking for me?" she asked timidly. "I am Miss McAllister. If you are Mr. Biddle——"

"Hopkins," he said, sitting bolt upright and removing his hat. On the point of replacing this article he sized up the youthful sweetness of the girl, and very

evidently considered it to be worthy his permanent bareheadedness. He therefore tossed the hat into the seat behind him. "To tell the truth and shame the devil, there's *no* Biddle. I just invented it to sound good. Hopkins is a kicky sort of name. Biddle is the ballast to keep Hopkins down. I'm Hopkins—Hunnerton Hopkins, very much at your service, Miss McAllister."

All the time he was talking he was plainly thinking of something else, and thinking hard.

He had the round, innocent face of a schoolboy, but it was criss-crossed with the wrinkles of forty odd years and of the persistently happy smiles which the real estate business engenders. He could have added that he was widely known as "Honey-tongue Hopkins."

"My, my, but this is the land, isn't it, Miss McAllister?"

Taking a handkerchief he mopped his forehead and surveyed with unfeigned affection the brooding, piney, heat-soaked solitudes of Seminole County. His large blue eyes were as ingenuous as a lad's filled with romance, first love, rabbit-dogs, and dreams, but his kindly mouth was always puckered shrewdly over projects of fencing in some of the adored solitudes and selling them for grove land at a high profit.

"Florida takes a hold of you till you can't shake off the spell of it, Miss McAllister. You see if it ain't so. Some folks allow that you get lazy down here, but 'tain't lazy so much as it's meditative. That's it—meditative." His deep voice was soothingly caressing. It crooned as comfortably and comfortingly as a darky mammy's. So drawling was it, so filled with the sweet singsong of the south that Laurie was sur-

prised to hear him say, "I'm a northerner myself, miss." But his concluding words explained much. "A northerner, yes, miss, from Kentucky, and I wouldn't go back north not if you paid me."

To hear Kentucky mentioned as the north jogged Laurie into remembering that she was very far indeed from Times Square, and that she had a vast deal of house-settling to do before nightfall.

Mr. Hunnerton Hopkins was so evidently copying Talleyrand in the respect of employing language to conceal thought, she had small compunctions about cutting him short.

"Please come and meet my grandfather, Mr. Hopkins. Then we are ready to go—if you are."

"My, my, your grandfather? I'm certainly pleased," said Mr. Hopkins slowly and with a noticeable access of mournfulness. He let himself out of his car, and went over and shook hands with The McAllister, who was fuming and fretting considerably at having been overlooked for too long. "Mr. *Laurence* McAllister?" asked Hopkins, scrutinizing him with a wary care, much as a housewife might examine a bit of rich old cheese for possible but undesired mites.

"*Andrew*, sir!" spluttered the patriarch. Why commoners did not know the "Andrew" by instinct was always an annoying mystery to him.

"My, my, but this is the warm and gentle land for such as you, Mr. Andrew!"

"*McAllister, sir!*"

Again there came into Mr. Hopkins' round blue eyes the badgered, pie-hunting expression with which he had searched the wharf at the time of his arrival.

Laurie began to understand his perplexity.

"There's no one else in the party, Mr. Hopkins,"

she said, smiling at a bit of knowledge she held in reserve.

"Don't say that 'Laurence' has backed out?" besought Mr. Hopkins. He was now worried. There was no doubt about it. He mopped his forehead as though faint and afraid.

"No, Laurence has not backed out, for I am Laurence," she said, smiling shyly and very happily. Her letters having been mistaken for a man's letters, she felt now as she had felt then—wonderfully complimented. Business ability which bore the masculine stamp could not fail but be of the right kind.

One of those letters Mr. Hopkins now ripped from his pocket. He opened it, struck it flat with his hand, and pointed to her signature.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"Laurie—and I'm Laurie. I bought the grove."

"You? You?" This situation was clearly a shock to him, and more than a shock, for lines of honest dismay and regret creased his round face. He folded the letter so slowly that the ceremony became awe-inspiring. In the silence the "tap, lap," of the river sounded like sobs. It had a dreary question in it. With a more ear-splitting creak than ordinary the impudently hooded blue jay did some derisive bird-calisthenics on the dead pine branch. Mr. Hopkins presently whistled the most lugubrious bars of "Old Black Joe." When he spoke it was eruptively.

"My, my, if I had only known—why, I never *would* have—— My, my, but you've give me the quaint and quisby qualms, Miss McAllister!" Then, wretchedly vocalizing, "*I think I hear the angels calling Old Black Joe!* . . . Miss McAllister, do you *reelly* mean to say that this is all the family you have?" He pointed down

to the old gentleman, the trunks, and the furniture, indiscriminately. "Mean to tell me that you haven't any *man* along?"

"*I* am here, sir!" reminded The McAllister, so feeble with indignation that he had to cling to his cane as an inebriate to a lamp-post.

"Yes, you're here—I see you're here," admitted Mr. Hopkins, without in the least bettering his state of mind.

Mr. Hunnerton Hopkins jerked himself away from the immediate center of disturbance and walked back to his car, against which he ruminatingly leaned with head drooped like a criminal's.

"What is the matter?" asked Laurie, swiftly following him. Then, under an anguishing doubt that took possession of her, she utterly gave way, as a girl is apt to do now and then when she is hourly bearing a strain too heavy for her youth. "Oh, don't say that you have deceived me in any way about the property, Mr. Hopkins! I couldn't stand it! I wouldn't know what to do! He is getting so old, nearly eighty, and has no one in the world but me. He needs a home so much—we both do—everybody belonging to us is dead, and we have no money. I spent all I had on the grove —every cent except a few dollars, not even enough to pay our passage back in case anything is wrong. And your face frightens me. You are frightened yourself. Tell me the worst. Isn't there any house? Isn't there any grove? Isn't there any crop?"

CHAPTER II

ABILITY to recover with rapidity and completeness from a moral shock being one of the necessary accomplishments of a good real estate man, Hunnerton Hopkins, instead of wilting under the girl's pathetically unreserved outbreak, revived. Its diversity provided him with legitimate reason for recovering. The land business is not a business at all, but an art, and a fine art at that, because before an agent can convince a customer he must first convince himself, and to convince oneself becomes harder and harder as years go by. After forty it is wellnigh impossible. The fact that Hunnerton Hopkins at forty-two was still able to sell was in itself a monument to his skill. When it can be further stated and proved that he could sell high pine land to a person who wanted a lake front, nothing additional need be put forth to establish the genius of the man.

"My, my, my, Miss McAllister," he now crooned in his tenderest mammy tones, crinkles of an amused integrity appearing around his eyes while he patted her shoulder with respectful encouragement, "no house, no grove, no crop? Why, how long do you suppose I'd last if I did business that way? Not five minutes, honey, not five minutes! *Sure* there's a house—nicest six-room frame building as ever I saw for the money. Home, sweet home, be it ever so humble, there's no place like home; sure there's a grove and a crop—all yours

and waiting for you. Jump into my gasoline chariot and we'll be there in an eye-twink. Ready?"

"How about my things?" asked Laurie, indicating her household goods.

"Hi, you, Abraham Lincoln Palm Beach Jackson!" yelled Hopkins, interrogating heated space. "You here?"

"Yas, Boss, yas, sir!" answered one of the negroes, melting into view.

"Where's your good-for-nothing brother?"

"Right hyar, sir," answered that gentleman himself, appearing with a pleased grin.

Napoleonically folding his hands underneath the tail of his wrinkled blue serge jacket Mr. Hopkins flashed his eye at the trunks and crates, and observed:

"Get a cart, gather up that truck yonder, and fetch it along after us. Understand?"

"Yas, Boss. Yess-*ee*," responded Abraham Lincoln Palm Beach Jackson.

"Shall I give you a leg up?" Mr. Hopkins then asked The McAllister, seeing him make ready to enter the car.

From discreet background Laurie vehemently shook her head. If one thing more than another vexed her grandfather to the bursting point, that one thing was being offered assistance before he asked for it. Her constant duty was to watch him carefully till he reached the danger mark, then to aid him at the last nick of time.

"Stubborner than a baby, hain't he?" asked Mr. Hopkins very admiringly and far too loudly.

The McAllister was not in the least deaf, but Hunnerton Hopkins had no other explanation of the old gentleman's ignoring of him. To be deaf and dumb

under attacks from the common people was Andrew McAllister's majestic method of escaping from them.

Hopkins helped Laurie to her seat, boxed her in with a bang, jumped to his own, and cried, "Now we're off!"

He suited the action to the word, but in front of the dilapidated store he slowed to a standstill.

"How about canned cow?" he asked intensely of Laurie.

"Canned what?" she questioned, knitting her brows over it in vain.

"Cow," he repeated. "No fresh milk in this part of the world."

"Oh, yes," she replied, comprehending at last. Her brows knitted closer as she studied the store. For in addition to a home-inked sign of "FANCY GROCERIES"—with the N printed upside down of course, there being some rural germ which always afflicts this letter badly—the window erupted at intervals with the utterly unrelated words "SHOES," "CIGARS," "DRUGS," "POST OFFICE," "FERTILIZERS"—the whole in a building not much more spacious than a coal bin, and just about as clean. "I think I won't buy anything here, but will wait till we come to a *real* store, Mr. Hopkins."

"I'm afraid there's nothing more real this side of the New Jerusalem," he remarked, scratching his head with eloquence.

"Oh, well," said Laurie, vaguely brave. She stepped out of the car.

"I'll go with you and introduce you to the proprietor," said Hopkins, doing it; at least he tried to be introductory, getting as far as "Here, Lem Menzies, here's a good customer."

But this happened to be the moment when Lem Menzies was being postmaster to the extent of checking some stamps.

"Shucks, you put me all out," he murmured, impatiently patient. "Hush up, Hun, and wait on you own self lak you always do."

"You want yeast and coal oil," said "Hun," establishing himself capably behind the counter.

"Do I?" asked Laurie, heartily hoping not.

"Yeast, coal oil, matches, flour, baking powder, and roach paste," said Hopkins expertly.

"What is made with roach paste?" asked the girl timidly. It was a kitchen condiment of which she had never before heard.

"Dead roaches," he answered. "Most satisfactory product of this pleasant land. Tea, coffee, sugar, butter, and fly paper."

"You seem to be provisioning me for a desert island," she said, her heart sinking.

"That's about it," he said, letting fall the admission by accident owing to his absorption in the task of wrapping the baking powder. A real estate man can, with neatness and finality, tie up a sale, tie up a customer, tie up a parcel of land, but he can *not* tie up a bundle.

"Salt, crackers, cocoa," murmured Laurie. It was her turn to play.

"Soap," scored Hopkins triumphantly.

"That's all," she said definitely, remembering her purse.

"No, it isn't," he answered, just as definitely. "Crackers, molasses, white bacon."

This last turned out to be a salt-incrusted variety of raw pork, smelling as if it had once gone bad in

its career but was now taking a slight turn for the better.

"It will be a long while before either of us eat *that*," prognosticated the girl firmly.

"I'll teach you how to cook it when we get up to the house," promised Hopkins, wrapping it in a newspaper. "When you're hungry it eats good as fried chicken."

Leaving the wildly swaddled provisions to be picked up by Abraham Lincoln Palm Beach Jackson and his brother, and leaving the items and the money to be audited by Lem Menzies of the single mind, Hopkins was soon whirling his patrons on their way again.

As she looked about her first on this side, then on that, seeing nothing but vast stretches of coarse sword grass growing from still vaster stretches of sand, the girl felt that the desert island theory was being strengthened by every turn of the wheel.

The most depressing thing about the landscape was that it unrolled, not in new vistas, but in endless repetitions of the old. A newcomer could get hopelessly lost in one acre of it. Each piece of palmetto scrub was exactly like the next piece. The pine tree back of you was the replica of the pine tree in front of you. And all of the pine trees were in a bad state of repair, owning charred stumps of arms and blasted heads. Quite a number of them were dead; some of the corpses leaned starkly back in the arms of a live brother, but most of them preferred to fall across the road. Owing to this the car was soon gazelling again.

"Ain't she a bird?" asked the owner proudly, as the three of them alighted back in their seats after a little airing incident to a passage over one of the logs. "She can climb a tree, jump a fence, do most everything for

me that I want 'cept open a gate. Got a car, Miss McAllister?"

"No," she answered.

"Mule?" he demanded.

She shook her head.

"Nag?"

Another shake.

"Bicycle?" he besought, his blue eyes widening tragically. Under the loosening of his grip on the steering wheel, his car was skipping like fleas.

"Hadn't you better hold on to it?" she asked.

"It's a Fode," he announced, delightedly mentioning a make that usually did *not* stand for glory. "Knows its way in the dark. But say, Miss McAllister, don't you even own a wheelbarrow?"

"Not even that," she admitted.

"My, my, my!" he ejaculated, a few bars of "Old Black Joe" coming from him again. "Well it's lucky we stocked up good down yonder," he concluded philosophically. Then after whizzing a full quarter of a mile in silence he ended the sentence, "For you never *would* be able to walk it, would you?"

"No," she answered thoughtfully. Her few steps from the car to the store had taught her that hot sand can clog the feet worse than the shackles of sin that we hear about on Sunday.

After going another mile Hopkins cried jubilantly, "Coming to good roads, see?"

True, the bumping was much less, but "good roads" merely meant that the ruts were mended by being faithfully overlaid with pine needles. Not yet resident enough to appreciate this big fact at its real value, Miss McAllister took a leaf out of her grandfather's book, and was silent.

"Look at the soil *now*," gleed Hopkins, later along. "Real dirt, ain't it?"

The sand was no longer white, but was loamy and certainly rich looking. Its effect on the trees was wonderful, for from it the pine trees grew tall and stately, giving out a resinous breath that was full of tonic and inspiration.

The heated air began to carry fleeting perfumes. Laurie suddenly clutched the edge of the car and looked over it.

"Rattlesnake?" asked Hopkins, preparing to stop the wheel and do battle. A good Floridian is bound in honor to exterminate all such.

"Flowers!" cried the girl ecstatically, for interspersed among the palmetto scrub were tall spikes of purple bloom. Over these floral spikes a myriad of beautiful butterflies continually flitted and shimmered.

"Oh, flowers!" said Hopkins, materially losing interest. "Gid ap!" This playfully to the Fode, which responded by several goat-like leaps.

Now a blessed little breeze hit one gratefully in the face.

"Coming to the lakes," translated Hopkins.

By this time even The McAllister condescended to look about him, for the scenery had insidiously bettered itself. It was the same thing, only glorified. The prevailing silence was no longer the silence of death and stagnation, but of happy expectancy.

"Home, James," said the facetious Hopkins, careering suddenly into a lane.

This lane led into a grove of choked, unpruned trees hung sparsely with green fruit.

"My trees?" asked Laurie excitedly, for were they not her gold mines?

"Your trees," corroborated Hopkins. "Every man-Jack of them—and your house!" For the final twirl of the Fode brought them face to face with a cottage and outbuildings, all appearing as suddenly as if from under a conjurer's magic handkerchief. Hopkins stopped his car and helped out his party.

Catching her grandfather's hand in her impulsive, warm ones, ready to support him, protect him, or joy with him, according to how things turned out, Laurie drew a deep breath and took silent stock of her possessions.

The cottage was small and dingy, but a coat of paint would do wonders. Magnolia trees and chinaberry trees clustered around it, giving it perfumed shade. A roofed veranda completely circled it, creating comfortable doubts as to which doors were front and which were back. At a distance was a barn, not much of a barn to a person in need of a barn, but a grand bit of bric-a-brac to a person who owned not even a wheel-barrow. Hitched to the barn was a pigsty whose chief recommendation was the fact that it had not held pigs for many years, and would never hold them in the years to come. There was an equally untenanted chicken house and run. There were a woodshed, a wagon shed, and a smokehouse. Even in baby days, when Laurie had sketched her future home on the sand of Coney Island beach, she had never dreamed of such a full estate as this.

From the buildings as a center, the grove stretched out in a square mat, making a huge checkerboard of itself, the glossy orange and grape-fruit trees running in straight lines which intersected at mathematically regular intervals.

Lastly, and most wonderful of all to city eyes, one

of the avenues of the grove led to a rippling lake of fresh water—no duck pond, but a cool, sea-green stretch a mile and a half long and some half a mile across.

"Quite a shack, eh?" finally inquired Mr. Hopkins.

He had been furtively watching his clients. The pleasure on their faces seemed to lift an intolerable load from his mind.

On Andrew's face the pleasure had a pathetic and beautifying effect. Always a lover of seclusion and of country freedom, he had suffered unguessed tortures in the city, especially from enforced social intercourse with "American innkeepers and tinkers," which was his rabid classification of his assiduous landlord and efficient janitor. Now his testy haughtiness fell from him like a cloak that was no longer needed. No less unnecessary than the spiritual cloak was the material one. Andrew McAllister threw aside his topcoat and tried to square his old shoulders. He had always hated to be "bundled" in a topcoat. The blazing Florida sunshine revived hopes in his heart.

"I can have a garden," he said gently. "Perhaps I shall be able to grow some heather, and see the blue flax flowers in bloom again. I have always wanted to grow a garden." Tears of simple pleasure stood in his eyes.

"Grandpa, grandpa!" cried Laurie, kissing his withered hand in wordless sympathy. She had never dreamed of his having such a longing.

"Now, come, open up," ordered Mr. Hopkins abruptly, plungingly ascending the veranda steps, loudly jingling keys in his hand. One might have thought that the load was threatening to come back

to his mind, and that he was performing noisy incantations to drive it away.

The three of them went through the house together, Mr. Hopkins accomplishing miracles of carpentry with the toe of his boot, kicking shutters open and kicking doors shut, till he had made a happy home in less than no time.

As the daylight and sunshine streamed into the deserted rooms a variety of embarrassed bugs and beetles hurled themselves recklessly and rattlingly from ledges, and lodged in cracks of retirement. Otherwise the dwelling was in fairly decent condition. It contained six good-sized rooms, two of them hideously papered, but the other four mercifully unadorned, showing their honest panels of cheap Georgia pine. The sitting-room boasted an open fireplace of rough red brick—a prettier looking object than it sounds. All the flooring was of pine, but it had been carefully selected and matched. A scrubbing with soap and water, and a going over with kerosene oil would renovate it above the need of being carpeted.

A few chairs and tables, an old bureau or two, a handsome deerhorn hatrack, some sensible porch seats, and an absolutely glorious old-fashioned mirror in an abused frame that was genuine ebony were about the only bits of furniture to deserve the name; they all bore a pleasantly welcoming air, as much as to say, "Now at last we'll be dusted."

After spending an hour in the opening-up process, Mr. Hopkins consulted his watch and gave a start.

"My, my, I must be trotting off," he said. "*Have* to make two more points before night. Well, Miss McAllister, we've tidied the bungalow pretty trim, haven't we? When your own stuff comes you'll be fixed

for fair. And those niggers ought to be along with it pretty soon. Say!" he exclaimed suddenly and pointedly, "of course, miss, you've got a gun?"

"Gun? No, no, no!" cried Laurie, recoiling nervously from the very idea. "I wouldn't feel safe a minute with a gun around."

"The prettier the girl, the more she needs a gun," advanced Mr. Hopkins with an assumption of light and laughing gallantry. But gloom was evidently in his soul again, for once more he whistled a tragic line from "Old Black Joe." "Oh, I reckon I'm in no rush to be off," he concluded after deep thought. "Guess I'll hang around till those coons have come—and gone. Maybe I'll be able to crack open a crate for you. Now I'll tell you how to cook that bacon—slice it and boil it first, then fry it."

"We forgot to buy a broom!" cried Laurie wretchedly. He had been so very domestic that her "we" fell with a most natural effect.

"Bet you'll find one in the kitchen cupboard," he prophesied. "It's considered mighty bad luck hereabouts to take a broom out of a house."

Sure enough a broom was there. The resourceful Hopkins killed time doing a number of useful odd jobs with it, and when the negroes finally did arrive he proceeded to "crack open a crate" to some purpose, directing Mr. Jackson and brother with such energy and inspiring profanity that trunks and furniture were placed and the trash cleared, all in his favorite "eye-twink." Nor until the darkies had driven windingly from sight did he prepare to take his own leave.

Laurie followed him outside and stood beside him while he cranked up his dusty gazelle. When he climbed into it she remembered that not in all the miles from

the boat landing to the bungalow had they passed a house.

"Aren't there *any* neighbors?" she asked, clasping her hands nervously.

Very pretty hands they were, slim and white and kissable. From his front seat Hopkins stared down at them, first with admiration, then with respect, then with commiseration. He shoved back a purely imaginary hat and scratched his head hard, trying to dig out a helpful answer.

"See here, honey," he began, using the caressing epithet so kindly that it was no insult. "Florida folks live far off, but never too far to come when they's needed. Remember that. And there's a house only two miles up the road. You can't see it unless their chimney smokes. And there's one across the lake. Look —a point of the red roof shows. Come, that's only half a mile away!"

"By water," qualified the young girl, still gripping her hands together. She looked across the lake, taking but little comfort in the point of red roof, for she had no boat. "How near is it by the road, Mr. Hopkins?"

Like a cactus, a real estate man has hundreds of unsuspected good points, and Hopkins really suffered at being obliged to reply:

"A goodish three miles, honey. Oh, dim, dem, dom, dum, *dam!*"

After giving way to this chain of epithets which seemed to show that the old blight was back upon his mind, he viciously twisted the tail of his gazelle, so to speak, and by it was soon borne leaping down the lane.

Standing alone in her new land she watched him till he entirely disappeared from sight. With the taking away of the constant rattle of his voice, which plainly

had been kept working to cover up some defects in the situation, silence seemed to settle down over the entire world like a big brooding bird. There was nothing left but solitude, not the humming solitude of cities, which is but another name for too much company, but the awful solitariness of Wordsworth's star, "When only one is shining in the sky."

Yet the almost tangible stillness had a warmth and vitality that was as potent as a dream-drug to set Laurie's fancies afloat. They wanted to wander from leaf to leaf like the gorgeous butterflies all around her.

But instead of being able to play princess in her enchanted garden she was obliged to enact Cinderella among the mislaid pots and pans of a chaotic new kitchen, and get supper ready. Her grandfather had given the warning sign by pottering out upon the porch and ostentatiously consulting his watch. The McAllister considered it beneath man's dignity ever to mention meals or to admit feeling healthily hungry; he also considered it an indelible blot upon a woman's soul if she did not have food on the table at the exact moment when that unmentionable feeling came to him. By examining his watch in advance and in plain sight, he felt that he was attending to the salvation of both of them.

"Grandpa, the flowers would have cost five dollars in New York!" she exclaimed later, when setting him down to a frugal meal whose chief magnificence was the floral centerpiece—snipped at random from one of the many blossoming vines on the porch. "To be able to dash out of five front doors and immediately lay your hands upon a bouquet is a thrilling experience for a Harlem-ite!"

"Yes, my darling," responded The McAllister with

his habitual courtesy and affection, but his eyes were fastened upon the nondescript-looking dish of "white bacon." His thoughts were fastened on that barren spot, too. The fact that the spot was flanked by a plate of crackers did not materially enhance its attractiveness.

From her seat opposite Laurie leaned forward and put her fragrant young hand gratefully upon his.

"You are a *brick!*" she said. Her lips were tremulous, and her eyes were smiling through a mist. "It's a *beastly* supper, and you are noble not to explode. I promise you better things in the future. I faithfully promise. Just think of the good things I can buy for you when the crop is sold and the money comes rolling in!"

"I have nothing to say against the supper, my dear," he observed. "And I see marmalade and oatmeal cookies which had escaped my notice. But permit me to protest most earnestly against 'brick,' 'beastly,' and 'explode.' Whatever else you may do of a questionable nature, Annie Laurie, do not, I entreat you, do *not* become American."

"How can I 'become' what I have already come to be, grandpa?" she asked hardily, then had the tact to shove the diversion of marmalade into the belligerent zone.

She had the satisfaction of seeing the old man eat a very good meal. After it, when he was sitting out on the porch, ostensibly to smoke, he dropped off into peaceful sleep. Yet insomnia had been one of his troubles in the cold north!

"Oh, I am sure everything is going to turn out all right," whispered Laurie to herself, as she surreptitiously covered his knees with a blanket.

Asleep, he was easier to care for than awake. Everything that was necessary for him had to be done by stealth. In his conscious hours he refused to be "coddled," claiming sternly that he "never caught cold." "Dust in the throat," he explained when he coughed. "Smoke in the nose," he remarked when he sneezed.

"If very old gentlemen could be sat in a corner when needing it, or be put to bed like naughty little children, I'm sure they'd be the better for it," murmured Laurie, balancing the disrespect of the remark by dropping a soft kiss upon his white hair before leaving.

The responsibility of being mother, child, nurse, doctor, housekeeper, and wage earner weighed so heavily upon her that she fairly dared not think of it.

"Things have *got* to turn out all right," she concluded, flinging trouble from her for the time. Youth's happy knack of feeling that what ought to be must be!

Across the grove, and garden, and lake, the sun was still shining, so the girl went on a little tour of investigation. She stood under an orange tree, tried to count the oranges, and gloatingly failed—they were too many for her. Next she wandered around the neglected garden hunting for and finding all sorts of plant treasures among the weeds.

Then came the magical moment of afternoon when the genius of Florida waves his wand and transforms his hitherto dull world into a Paradise of color and perfume.

Laurie gazed around her, entranced. Was this the country she had called flat, uninteresting, lonely? The whole place was suddenly astir; squirrels frisked from branch to branch of the laden pecan trees; flaming cardinal birds, sprites of fire and song, darted like jewels from one citrus covert to another; and the mocking

birds, less shy, took companionable—not to say inquisitive—possession of each stump and post, occasionally exchanging choice short sentences in a liquid gurgle that was friendliness itself. The balsamic spice of pines made every breath an elixir of life, and across the whole width of the western sky were sunset reds of such lithographic impudence that one had to rub one's eyes open in order to make sure that the conflagration was in the sky alone, and not on the earth beneath.

The long lake reflected the blaze so exactly that but for the picturesque pines on its shore there was no telling where the heavens ended and the waters began.

"Don't ever dare say 'Italy' to me again!" murmured Laurie, addressing geography books in general, as she sauntered down to the lake to get as near as possible to the grandeur.

She now found that she owned a boat dock, even if no boat—a winding, wooden, wobbling centipede of a thing, with a hundred legs taking it out into the water, some of the legs missing and all of them rotting.

Before she reached this venerable ruin she made a second discovery. This one affected her as the sight of a sail might affect a castaway on a raft.

A man had just put out in a canoe from the opposite shore, and was now paddling towards her with the sweeping sure stroke of an Indian.

CHAPTER III

ACROSS the sunset-tinted water the canoe approached with the beauty and stateliness of Lohengrin's swan. Coming nearer, the man who paddled it showed himself to be young and very well set up. Indeed he was so fine of favor that in Lohengrin's time—whatever that fabled time was supposed to be—he might have been obliged to bear up under the epithet of beautiful. This water-arriving knight, instead of being a silver one, was a golden one. His thick brown hair had a bronze gloss, and on his cheek was the gold-brown of perfect, virile health; in costume he had stuck faithfully and artistically to yellows, being completely in khaki, even to the exemplarily knotted tie at his tanned young throat. From knee to shoe he was in bright butter-colored leather puttees.

He radiated such a suggestion of storm-proof immaculateness that one would not be surprised to see him go through shipwreck and come out dry. At this present moment he looked ready to lead an army into battle, a girl through a cotillion, or to paddle a canoe.

Though he saw the feminine watcher from the start, he did not allow her presence to hurry his movements, or to retard them. She did not entangle them in the slightest particular. He rhythmically kept on coming.

When arrived, he judiciously picked out the least rotten leg of the centipede and tied his canoe to it,

still with the aplomb and precision of the utterly unwatched. He jumped lightly to the wobbling dock, walking its entire shaking length with a hermit's magnificent composure.

Face to face with Laurie he stopped, and said with a conciseness that just missed being curt:

"Pardon. Is this McAllister's grove?"

"Why—well," she began, rather at a loss to know the right reply to the question as put. Also she was repeating to herself the young man's pronunciation of his first word, and thinking how grandpa would love to hear it! "Pawdon." So English you could cut it with a knife and pass it around!

The young man spoke again, with emphasis, as if to help out a presumable imbecile.

"McAllister. One Laurence McAllister. A newcomer. They tell me he has bought a grove on this side of the lake. Is that so?"

To the peremptoriness of the query the girl made chary reply:

"Yes. That's so."

"Knowing by experience how lonely and perplexed a grove owner feels at the beginning, I have come over to be neighborly and to talk trees. I own the grove across the lake. I fancy I can give McAllister some points. My name is Roycroft—Charles Roycroft."

He mentioned it not in social introduction, but as business recommendation, it standing for all that was successful in citrus culture.

"And I'm McAllister," she offered in stolid exchange.

He frowned and she smiled.

He brought his heels correctly together and acknowledged her labeled presence with a bow, but his frown deepened. He had all of a young Englishman's ob-

jection to being chaffed by a girl with an American accent. For he naturally had taken her statement to be a joke, American brand.

This utterly new and very blasting experience of being frowned at and down by a man, and the knowledge that she had brought it upon herself by a rather unmaidenly flippancy, sent Laurie's head proudly up. She locked her lips upon explanation. Let him reach whatever conclusion that pleased him. Let him, if he wished, unhitch his swan and go. But she said,

"My grandfather will be very glad to welcome you, I am sure, Mr. Charles Roycroft. Do you care to walk up to the house?"

"Most certainly; and I thank you," he replied, angrily tugging at a place where a mustache might be some day but was not now. "I regret having antagonized you."

"By what flight of fancy did you reach the idea that that calamity had happened?" she asked, smiling again.

She felt that a smile would be more unpleasing to him than a grimace under the circumstances.

"Because you threw in 'Charles,' " he answered with uncompromising definiteness.

"Then I will throw out 'Charles,' " she said, affability itself. "This is the way to the house, Mr. Roycroft."

She led it very precipitately, enjoying the fact that he had to stride along quite faithfully in order to keep up. This was rudeness on her part, she knew, but the knowledge only refreshed her. She felt that it was positive philanthropy to provide him with plenty of reason for his initial lack of interest in her. He had arraigned her twice in five minutes for discourtesy;

here was his third chance. She might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. But he followed in a silence as complete as hers.

"Did I go too fast?" she asked, turning to him pleasantly when she reached the porch steps. She was aching for a clash, and was sorry to see that opportunity for it was fading, for, above her, her grandfather was struggling to his feet, preparing to greet the guest.

"Not too fast," answered Roycroft, "but a little farther than was needed."

"Ascend, sir, and be seated," invited The McAllister. Later, it *might* be, "Come up, man, and sit down," but first occasions were always ceremonial with the old gentleman.

He was a grandfather to be proud of—spiritual and wraith-like in appearance, frail in body as a puff of thistledown, but sturdy in spirit. "With more ancestors at his back than you could shake a stick at," was the way his admiring descendant phrased it to herself.

"Grandpa, this is Mr. Ch——" She stopped. If "Charles" was to be thrown in again, let Charles himself throw him. "This is Mr. Roycroft. Knowing by experience how lonely and perplexed a grove owner feels at the beginning, he has come over to be neighborly and to talk trees. He owns the grove across the lake. He fancies he can give McAllister some points."

"You have an excellent memory," coolly commented the young man, finding time to say it to her even while he was advancing a gracious hand to her grandfather.

"For certain things," she mentioned qualifyingly.

Then she went into the kitchen and proceeded to make lemonade with an ease that fascinated her. To obtain the fruit she had only to put her hand out of

the kitchen window and pluck the bumps from a shrub that shaded it. Mr. Hopkins had drawn her attention to this providential shrub, and he had called the fruit Tahiti limes.

"But if a thing looks like a lemon, and acts like a lemon, and tastes like a lemon, it *is* a lemon," she now told herself, cutting and squeezing hospitably.

After carrying the resultant nectar to the two gentlemen on the porch she resolutely betook herself into the garden again, taking especial pains to wander out of sight.

If that khaki canoeist had come to see a McAllister man, a McAllister man he should have, and nothing more.

But as the sunset fires began to die and the shadows lengthened, the voluntary exile in the garden wondered much at the staying qualities of the visitor.

"Though if grandpa's taken to him he'll tell him all about us from A to Z. That yellow creature will just have to sit and listen. Yes, that's what's happened."

She could hear the old man talking in the happy, high-pitched voice he always used when he found a friend who suited him. Only occasionally could she hear a rumble from the young one. Charles Roycroft had the manliest kind of a deep voice, but at present was being given very little chance to use it.

She gathered flowers till she had an armful, then—reaching the woodpile—she sat down on an unpoetical soap box to arrange them. She played the unknown tropical beauties dreamily from hand to hand, wondering half the time what their queer names were, and wondering the other half whether she had not better attend to the duty of rescuing Roycroft from being talked to death.

At last the conversation stopped. In due time she heard Roycroft crisply stamping around the grounds, evidently searching for her.

"I can live till morning without saying good evening to him," she told herself cheerfully. "He might as well give it up."

Even while so communing with herself she felt in her heart that he was not of the giving-up type. His chin alone had told that. Therefore she was not utterly surprised when he rounded the kitchen corner of the house and found her.

Too encumbered with blossoms to rise she sat still and waited with more or less interest for him to declare himself. He owned no compunctions about declaring himself, she had noticed.

The interview was evidently scheduled to be protracted, for he began by booting out a soap box for himself and placing it directly opposite her, though at a conventionally respectful distance. Then he sat down, threw his hat upon a near hibiscus bush, where it hung among the flowers like a big black blight, locked his shapely brown hands between his spread knees, and said resoundingly, "Miss McAllister, my word for it, you are facing an appalling situation."

"Indeed?" she asked, irritatingly placid.

"Indeed." He returned the word to her. "You are up against an impossible proposition. Dead up against it."

"Now you are talking United States," she commended. How dare he hang unasked his opinions upon her affairs, as his hat upon her hibiscus bush? On the edge of expressing her resentment she looked hard at him. Then she helplessly turned away her glance, for in his clear, unafraid eyes she read the confession

that her grandfather's garrulity *had* acquainted him with her entire life and affairs. "You speak with a great deal of—surety," was her compromise.

She studied a hibiscus flower with close attention, trying to decide whether it pleased her or provoked her by its crimson exuberance and awful extravagance. Though it was as large as a young cabbage it was content with blossoming but for a day. It and its friends were now preparing to shut up.

"I am glad you did not say assurance," said the young man after a careful weighing of "surety." He was icily persistent. "For your own sake I shall not accept your hint to go."

"My sake?" she asked, arching her delicate eyebrows a trifle. "Please do not martyr yourself for any such inadequate reason."

"You are making it difficult for me, but nevertheless I intend to talk the matter over."

"What 'matter'?" she asked, coldly. "For my part, I am unaware of any 'matter' that requires to be talked over."

"That remark happens to hit the very heart of the situation. You are unaware, and someone must enlighten you."

"Were you ever in New York?" she inquired, bending engagingly forward.

"Yes." His icy civility stood much strain.

"For how long were you there?" she sweetly persisted.

"Perhaps a year."

"Then if you learned the language, please speak it."

"You mean that you do not understand me?"

"I mean just that. You have wrapped your re-

marks in such elegant tinfoil that I don't know whether it's candy or pills. Say something plain."

"I will—your entire resources are less than a hundred and fifty dollars, and three months must elapse before an orange can be sold."

"For position of 'guide, philosopher, and friend,' you qualify," she said, her breath coming quickly and indignantly.

"I tried my best not to invite the honor of your grandfather's confidence, Miss Laurie."

The very inflection that he put upon her given name was complete avowal that he knew the history of *that* too. And his use of it showed that he had left off thinking her grown up.

"You have been made acquainted with our affairs from top to bottom and inside out?" she asked, upset and bewildered.

"Without discourtesy I could not stop him."

"Then since you know everything, why the tragedy and disapproval?"

"If that is the tone of——" Roycroft, who had risen in excusable heat, now sat down again. He resumed the impassive air of a physician who refuses to be shocked or annoyed by scurrility in a raving patient.

"I could not have done any more wisely than I did in buying this place," she stated, her bewilderment growing. "The grove means a home, and a pretty one, and means a steady income."

"Miss Laurie, your grove means expense, debt, and disaster."

"Oh, please don't say that!" she cried. Fright drove the indignant pink from her cheek, leaving her shaken and pale. "Poor grandpa, who is beginning to be so

happy! He couldn't stand debt and disaster at his age. It would kill him. Can't you take back what you said?"

"On the contrary, I must repeat it. This grove spells absolute ruin to anyone who is not a man—either a rich man, or a man strong enough to perform the work of three."

"But how? But why?" she stammered on. "I went into it all so carefully first! They told me—that is, he told me—for it was Mr. Hopkins—he told me that the capacity of my trees was twenty boxes apiece. I have five hundred trees—I know I have, for I counted them, and even if the boxes brought only two dollars apiece——"

"Do you know what is meant by the 'capacity' of a tree?"

"What's on it."

"No; the capacity of a tree means what it is possibly capable of bearing when under the highest state of cultivation. And why do you say 'only' two dollars a box? Two dollars is an extremely large price. Who led you to expect more?"

"No one." She was no longer capricious, but was answering with the stunned docility of a child under catechism. "But you have to pay five dollars in New York."

"Paying and selling are different. Nor are you selling to New York; you are selling either to a broker or to a citrus exchange. Do you know what the exchanges were paying the producer for grapefruit last year?"

"No."

"Thirty-two cents."

"Why, that's immense!" she said, momentarily

elated. "I've seldom had to give more than twenty cents for grape fruit."

"A box?"

"A box? Nonsense! A single fruit."

"I mean thirty-two cents a box."

"That's impossible!"

"Highly so," he answered composedly. "But the citrus grower often has to accept the impossible."

"W-e-l-l," she said, slowly considering, "if you sell boxes enough, even thirty-two cents apiece is good fortune."

"If each box has cost you thirty-five cents to produce?"

"For a wet blanket you're the wettest," she murmured, gritting her teeth. "How can fruit cost anything? Doesn't it produce itself?"

"Culls produce themselves—yes."

"What kind of fruit are 'culls'?"

"The worthless kind." He got up, strode off to the nearest tree, among whose branches he hunted the briefest of seconds, and soon was sitting opposite her again, this time with two large oranges in his hand. "What do you think of these?"

"Think they were the best two I had," she answered shortly.

"Both culls. No packer would include them in a box."

"What—beside yourself—*culled* them?"

"This has citrus scab on it; this is pierced by a thorn."

"I don't see how any can escape being pierced by thorns."

"Nor I—on your trees."

"What's the special matter with my trees?"

"This grove has been neglected for years; it is so full of disease as to be a menace to other groves. To cure it entirely would cost a small fortune. It is starved as well as diseased; to feed it properly will cost many hundred dollars a year. Worse, its impoverished and famished condition makes it particularly liable to injury by frost and winds. Every winter this grove sheds half its crop before selling time. In fact no one hereabouts would buy it. More, no one would accept it as a gift."

"Oh!" she cried, as if shot. She put the back of her hand across her eyes, needing to shut out even the dim evening light, for she felt sick and faint. "How he lied to me!"

"That man Hopkins is in no wise to blame. He is rather a decent sort. He is honest with his clients. You were not his client. The owner of the grove was his client. Hopkins' business was to sell the grove for the owner, and he sold. You must not blame *him.*"

"Whom then?" asked the girl wanly. Roycroft's intonation had suggested that someone, somewhere, *was* to blame.

"Yourself," said the young man, speaking rather roughly.

A sensitive young man is apt to speak in this way when he sees some fragile, pretty thing suffering and knows that he has done it.

"Why myself?" she asked, drawing her breath in sobbing fashion.

"Were you not—well, *mad*—to imagine that for four thousand dollars you could buy a place good for ten thousand a year indefinitely?"

"They told me the owner sacrificed it because he needed money."

"Did you not stop to think that he could have borrowed twice four thousand upon it had he had ten thousand boxes of fruit in sight?"

She drooped her head miserably. The sanguine fool that she had been!

"How much *is* in sight?" she presently asked, relegating the former owner's problem to oblivion. It was her own problem that was on deck.

Turning upon his soap-box throne, the young man ran his eye down several rows of trees, computing.

The girl, watching his concentration as exemplified in his keen eyes and firm set chin, was forced to admire it, though her admiration was against her will. It does not come natural to admire the skill of a surgeon who is amputating one's member, and ruthless amputation was evidently going on in the calculations of the young grove expert.

His profile was the best part of him, she decided. The clear outline of it, the lay of his thick hair, were both comfortingly classic, and very becoming to his general style of forcefulness, to his suggestion of productive youth, was the steel blue streak on his cheek where the recent razor had been. Yes; he was *abominably* handsome.

Noting that he was pivoting round again on the soap box she erased the artistic analysis from her expression as an art student might hastily rub out an idle charcoal sketch before the master reached the spot.

"The average is perhaps a box to a tree," he decided. "A grove box. The number of packed boxes would be less. Moreover, you must expect half of the fruit to fall. The grove is exhausted; it is as sick as a child with diphtheria. Even you should be able to see that."

The "even" sounded like "poor idiot that you are," but the girl was too frightened to resent it. She studied the grove.

"It looks strong and big," she faltered. "The trees are nice and clumpy and bushy, and almost everyone seems to have half a dozen sprouting up at its roots, and the leaves are such a lovely yellow."

"Are you making game of the situation or of me?" he asked, a tremendous flash coming into his eyes.

"Of neither—not now. I'm just telling you what I see."

"You have seen enough to condemn any grove. Yours has to be pruned, and pruning at this time is about as dangerous as no pruning at all. All the trees have die-back and withertip. A few of them have foot rot. That shriveled one has blight. All you can do to *that* is to burn it, and the sooner the safer. If instead of being a young lady, and not a conspicuously strong one, you were two or three men, you *might*, by working night and day, by spraying, by fertilizing, by cutting off the water-runners, by plowing lightly, by harrowing, by scrubbing the bark of each and every tree with a solution of whale-oil soap, you *might* realize two hundred dollars on this year's crop."

"Oh!" cried Laurie again. She rose unsteadily, sending the flowers spilling unheeded to her feet. The future went black.

Roycroft rose too.

"It was my positive duty to tell you this," he stated, once more speaking with roughness. "It gives you an opportunity to go back to your home and friends before discouragement drives you."

"Go back 'home'?" she asked, lashing herself as well

as him. "Didn't I take pains to pull it all down over our heads before I came away? Didn't I give up my stenographer's position and see that they got a splendid worker in my place? Didn't I use every cent of my money in buying *this?* And to what 'friends' could I say, 'Take in grandpa and myself and support us indefinitely'?"

"As I remarked before, you are in an appalling predicament," he observed, above the futility of offering consolation. "I for one do not see how you are going to get out of it."

"I'm going to get out of it by staying in!" she declared, clenching her hands. "You said three men could. All right, I'll *be* three men—I'll *have* to! I'll do the work—I've *got* to!"

"You'll plow?" he asked. He was not amused; he was angry, as angry as any serious worker is when absurd statements are made to him.

"I'll plow," she said, "if I have to get down on my hands and knees and do it with my haircomb! I've been performing a man's work with my head ever since I was fourteen years old; now I'll try it with my fingers for a change."

She ripped his hat from the hibiscus bush and handed it to him with eloquent significance.

But he took so long about going that the tears she had hoped to hide came first. She put her slim white hands in front of her face and wept quietly but uncontrollably.

He folded his arms, to give them something safe to do, and looked down at her intently, able to see little else but brow and neck.

"I shall be over here quite frequently," he observed.

"Will you?" she asked, a satirical sob in her tone

suggesting that people usually waited till they were invited.

"Quite frequently," he repeated. "Your grandfather has favored me by requesting me to play chess with him. I shall give you all the advice and help that I can, whether you ask for it or not. I have many books on citrus culture that you must read. I shall bring them. Perhaps you need tools that I may possess in duplicate, such as pruning knives and shears —clippers. Please think a moment and tell me what I may bring you, for there is something, is there not?"

He asked this with pardonable certainty, seeing that she had lowered her hands and was regarding him with a dawning of hope.

"Yes," she answered timidly, "I've thought of one thing."

"Mention it."

"I'd like a kitten—if you could find one," she half whispered.

"Kitten?" he echoed. His brilliant brown eyes flared again. He evidently never felt quite safe against the American joke. "Pardon—perhaps I misunderstood you or you me. I half fancied you said 'kitten.' "

"What you 'hawf fawncied' was wholly right," she said, sobbing again. "I want a kitten. I awfully want a kitten. I need to have something around that's soft and cuddley. And now—good-by, please."

. . . . . .

A few minutes later he was down at the centipede dock by himself, unfastening his canoe with the air of correct leisure that accompanied all his actions. His mind was extremely busy, and in a tone that hinted at being an unusually rich baritone he was humming "Annie Laurie."

He stood in the canoe, gave a stroke which looked too gentle to be efficient but which resulted in sending him straight and far on his way, and he then presented these bars to the wave-lapped dusk:

"Her brow is like the snaw-drift,
Her neck is like the swan."

The evening world was wrapped in a smoky amber haze that is all Florida knows of twilight. In this haze the land and water stretched away to infinity, owning no boundaries. In the sky, which appeared to have dropped till it was much closer to the earth, a few stars kept coming out and going in again, finding the night not yet dark enough to need them.

"*That* much of the song is true, at all events," discovered Charles Roycroft.

CHAPTER IV

WHY have poets never dropped a hint of the fact that sometimes a picturesque pump won't pump?" Laurie asked herself one morning, after persuasive and finally indignant manipulation of a rusty handle that merely hiccoughed and wheezed in lieu of producing a drop of water.

She relinquished the handle at last, watching it asthmatically raise itself high in air and stay there at an angle no sensible pump arm is supposed to take, and then sat herself down on the Moloch's sloppy platform to calm her state of mind by surveying the scenery.

The "meditativeness" of the scenery was growing into her system, just as Mr. Hopkins had said it would.

By the clock the morning was still delightfully young, but by the feel of the sun it might have been ardent midday. Warm and steaming perfumes floated around, coming from everywhere at once. It was like being in a conservatory.

Cloistered in the citrus trees, all the unhysterical birds rested after the arduous exertions of their five o'clock matin concert, but the blue jays were still at large exchanging sarcastic shrieks about it, and on the dead limb of a pine a row of pessimistic critics in the shape of teetering crows laughed raucously. In the chicken yard the chickens were huddled plungingly

in a far corner, awesomely watching a flock of buzzards take possession of the inclosure.

The moment a buzzard leaves the air and comes to earth it behaves with the collapse and uselessness of a pricked balloon. These in the chicken yard were tumbling clumsily around like lomomotor ataxia victims, their big wings spread in constant readiness for flight, and they were hissing goosily at each other while defending choice bits of garbage. They were almost as large as eagles and quite as ferocious-looking. Laurie's sympathies were with the beleaguered chickens until a tiny mocking bird instituted a performance which showed up the buzzards for what they were.

The mocking bird had been watching the invaders from a fence-post, its expressive tail tipping up and down with an eloquence which amounted to talkativeness, its bright eyes filled with amusement. When unable to stand the bravado of the hissers any longer, it darted at them with a cheep that meant "Scat!" And with precipitancy and confusion the flock of buzzards scatted, rising in the air and making off like a storm-driven cloud of darkness.

Then the mocking bird flew back to the post and cocked its eye merrily at Laurie as much as to say, "Did you extract the full humor from that ludicrous exhibition?" A mocking bird's remarks are always refined. Under the same circumstances a jay would have said, "Say, dame, didn't that beat all?"

The chickens Laurie had succeeded in buying from the rural mail carrier, a bent old darky who rode a mule, and who, in the sandy silence of his long, hot route, did almost everything with the mail except put it into the right boxes. But he sinned with such simple

sweetness and real kindness of heart that nobody would have been brutal enough to complain.

Of course he was able to read, else he could not have passed the civil service examination—though he probably "passed" it by being hopped right over it by some friendly hand—but the act of reading entailed such a cock-fight experience with a pair of horn spectacles that the old colored man preferred to distribute the mail by faith alone, letting it fall into waste places like manna.

"Is I got chickens, lady?" he echoed, bending benignantly down to Laurie who stood in the road beside his moth-eaten steed. "An' yo' determine yo' ain' want this?" he sidetracked regretfully, looking down at a letter she had just handed back to him—a smeary missive scrawlingly but plainly addressed to one Bill Menefee. He reluctantly returned it to his saddle-bag. "Chickens?" remembering wearily. "Yes, lady, I is."

"Will you sell me about a dozen?"

"Sho'ly, sho'ly," he answered, warming to the conversation. "Live er daid?"

"Alive, of course!"

"Sho'ly. Does yo' want de chickens to lay aigs?—Or does yo' want de vari'ty what costs money and yo' keep mos'ly fo' displayment of 'em to yo' fr'en's?"

"Eggs," announced Laurie with impact.

"Den I 'vise yo' to pu'chase de frizzly vari'ty o' chicken."

"The *what* variety?"

"Frizzly vari'ty. Din' yo' know, lady, dat every chicken is some vari'ty? One vari'ty's laighone; one's coach in Chiney; one's wine dots. What I jes' enumerate is de high-price vari'ty; and yo' have to tend 'em like chillen. But frizzly chickens is homely *nigger*

chickens, wid scaley laigs and mighty few proud notions. Dey ambition is to lay aigs and dey lays 'em."

"Then please bring frizzly ones," Laurie decided, turning away.

She could not afford to linger all day in the middle of the road the way the mail evidently could.

And next morning there he was with twelve frizzly chickens tied together, two and two, and strung across the mule's neck, where they hung, uncomplainingly fluttering, six on one side, six on the other, changing the mule into quite a Pegasus. The philosophical fowls, turning the outing into a treat, pecked pleasantly into likely looking places among the mule's fuzz.

After the labor of introducing them to their new home Laurie had no further trouble with them. Calm fails to describe them. But they were as composite as composed; architecturally they showed the bad points of every breed known to hendom. Any one of them could say, with Alexander Pope,

> "Keep on, kind friends, and let me see,
> All that disgraced my betters met in me!"

Their color was mostly that of a brown Betty teapot, and one feather sprouted forward, another back, a third straight up. This gave them the disreputable appearance of having been out all night in a brawl. But they preserved their ambitions—they laid.

"And grandpa likes eggs as much as he needs them," now mused Laurie contentedly, turning her glance from the frizzly comforts to scan the landscape for the old man.

There he was, at a near distance. In his decent black garb, with his silvery hair almost touching his bent

shoulders, he looked aristocratic enough for a retired duke at the very least. Supposedly gardening, he was doing any number of spasmodic, inadequate queer things with a hoe, scarifying as many roots as he protected. With The McAllister, whatever *he* could not recognize as a plant was a weed. But he was happy, ineffably happy. He was at last warm enough; he was secluded from assault from "American tinkers"; he was on family estate.

"Oh, I never can tell him about the grove!" cried Laurie to herself. "He'd fret himself into a sickness. I'll brave it out by myself till the crash comes. Meanwhile I must work and work!"

Spurred to it anew, she jumped up and had another bout with the pump handle, merely getting out of it an improved set of wheezes.

Then she heard a maddeningly cool, maddeningly cultivated voice behind her.

"Is there anything amiss with it?" asked Charles Roycroft.

"Maybe not; maybe it just likes me to exercise it in the sunshine," she panted, wheeling around upon her visitor rather viciously. Each appearance of this man was associated with the smashing of a hope. Today the hope was the pump. "Good morning," she added.

He lifted his hat punctiliously, resettling it with his usual care. It repaid him by becoming him vastly. A man's fine brown eyes can gleam out very effectively from under a well-set hatbrim. Roycroft was in an immaculate new set of khaki, looked fresher than the proverbial daisy, and, in spite of his row across the blowy lake, was neater than the proverbial pin. The god Mars could not have stood more alert and soldierly.

"You're no frizzly chicken," murmured the girl with envy. She furtively hid her scratched and rusty little hands behind her back.

He gave this remark his attention, then dismissed it for an Americanism of probably irreverent import. After a silence long enough to convey condemnation of such idioms, he delivered himself of a plain fact.

"I have brought the kitten."

His outraged man's blood stained his cheek while he went through the intricate maneuvering of extricating the kitten from his pocket all in one piece.

It was a mewing, clawing shred of a cat about three inches long, with blurred blue eyes. So far as original intention went, it was white. When it found itself in the glare of day it shrieked heartrendingly.

Laurie quickly took it into the cup of one hand, fitting the other hand over it like a saucepan-lid, immediately quieting it. She occasionally lifted the lid, and peeped.

"It looks ready to die," she accused poignantly. "What made you take it away from its mother at this age?"

"In regard to its age it was not as communicative with me as it has evidently been with you," he answered dryly. "I had no idea *what* age it was. I picked it out because it was the prettiest."

"Prettiest!" scoffed Laurie. "I'm sorry for the rest!" She removed the lid to prove her point.

They both looked hard at the kitten. It was wobbling on its back in the cup, and was obviously communing with ethereal spirits, for it dabbed coyly at absolutely unseen things.

"I believe it's out of its head!" cried Laurie, aghast.

"So do I," said Roycroft, agreeing with her for once.

"And I arrived at that conclusion before you did."

Pityingly she lifted the mouse-sized creature to her face and carefully kissed it.

"Apparently you take to idiots," he observed, disgusted.

"I'd be very lonely if I couldn't, wouldn't I?" she asked companionably.

He surveyed her long and steadily. For a few seconds she similarly returned the compliment. Her long eyelashes finally dropped like a curtain.

"What *is* the matter with the pump?" he then asked.

"I don't know," she answered, her defiant cheerfulness departing in a lump. "I can't make it do a thing. I'm ready to give up. I want to die."

She had all of the ordinary woman's magnificent ignorance of machinery. It was still news to her that screws had an invariable direction for going in and for coming out. She always gave them six turns to the right, then six turns to the left, in order to let them make up their minds about it. She looked upon nuts as immovable excrescences—ornaments maybe. Regarding the pump, she was in real despair. And her distressed face showed it.

"Oh, I say, you jolly well must not feel that way about it!" remonstrated Roycroft, startled. "Here, Peter!" He whistled, and waited a moment.

Then, from a respectful ambush of vines, his colored foreman marched into view. There are very few Peters left in the south; none in the north. For Peter was pure African, with real wool instead of nondescript hair, with gentle voice and gentle manners instead of obstreperous ones. He established his dignity by being honest and faithful.

To him Roycroft now tossed a can of evaporated

milk which he had just produced from another pocket.

Peter caught it imperturbably. He had his master copied down to the last degree.

"Take the kitten to Miss Laurie's back porch," ordered Roycroft, transferring the feline lunatic from white hand to black.

"Yais, sir, Mr. Rake-off."

"Punch two holes, and feed it."

"Yais, sir, Mr. Rake-off. Punch two holes in de li'l cat?"

"In the can. And endeavor not to be a fool, Peter."

"Yais, sir, Mr. Rake-off."

Peter stolidly departed on his unusual errand.

"I want to feed the kitten myself," said Laurie, watching the black man enter unctuously upon the task.

"I want a serious word with you," said Roycroft, settlingly.

"Serious? Have the others all been light and airy?" she asked.

"I see that you are under constant mental strain. And I do not wonder at it. But I may be able to give you helpful advice if you will only talk to me freely —I should say talk to me sincerely." His deep voice fell heavily on "sincerely," suggesting that "freely" was already present, and superfluously so. "But first permit me to ask you, have you a gun?"

"You are the second who has wanted to know," she said, objectingly. "No, I have no gun. More, I don't ever intend to. Couldn't shoot if I would, and wouldn't shoot if I could."

"You must have a gun," he determined, sweeping all the rest to a sidetrack of everlasting oblivion. "And I have brought you one." He reached behind him and produced a most wickedly gleaming revolver. After

giving it a farewell inspection he tendered it towards her. "Oblige me by keeping this always on your person. Not on your bureau. Not locked in a trunk."

She clasped her refusing hands behind her back.

"Kitten. Milk. Pistol. What else have you in your pockets?" she derisively asked.

He took careful thought before replying.

"A magnifying glass, a case-knife, two linen handkerchiefs with R embroidered in the corner, a flexible bass-minnow, a lucky shilling, and perhaps four dollars in silver change," he admitted. "Not forgetting a gold watch of Geneva movement, containing a lady's picture."

She caught her breath quickly, and her eyes darkened, for his rudeness had been greater than hers. His had been planned. Then—

"Show me the lady's picture," she ordered, smiling nonchalantly—beating him.

He stared and bit his lip, stopping just short of uttering the refusal that evidently had come to his tongue.

She kept on smiling the stare to its death. She waited expectantly. As grudgingly as if in a holdup, Charles Roycroft silently took a costly gold watch from a chamois case, pressed a knob, sprung a lid, and displayed the miniature of a very beautiful young woman—a thoroughbred girl if ever there was one.

Without taking the watch from his hand—indeed she could not, for it was chained to his annoyed person—Laurie studied the miniature with outward calm but inward conflict of many emotions. The foremost was a sudden queer compassion for herself, that she, Annie Laurie McAllister, had been unable to remain in the cloisters of home, as evidently had this reserved and lovely English girl, but had early been forced out into

the battle of the working world, inevitably losing some of her innate gentle shyness. How she had wanted not to, had wanted to remain gentle, shy, and cloistered!

Again, how furious it always made her to hear slurring remarks uttered by masculine lips about the young women "who thrust themselves into the arena with men, preferring the emoluments of business life to the sweet duties of home!" Why did they not have justice enough to remember that home has an incurable habit of falling flat if *somebody* doesn't go out and earn rent? True, Charles Roycroft had made no slurring remarks, not of this particular description, that is—but she unerringly knew that he owned by national and racial inheritance a prejudice in favor of dependent, chaperoned maidens.

Another emotion was an anguished realization of the fact that she had not seen a girl for weeks—not a woman of any description. Of course she had had society. There had been her grandfather, and voluble Mr. Hopkins of the selling tongue, and the mailman, and serviceable Peter, and imperious Charles Roycroft—men of all ages, colors, and tempers—but nothing strictly human like a girl. "McAllister" had a dismally quarantined feeling. She had to brace herself to speak.

"Your sister?" she asked.

He faintly smiled and shook his head slowly, with infinite reminiscence.

"Not in the least my sister," he said, immediately putting the miniature away, safe from the profanation of sight and question. "She has brothers enough without me," he added, "blood brothers and acquired ones."

Thought Laurie, "Of course she has; everybody in the world has a man to protect her, so it seems, except myself." The substance matter of this reverie caused her to say aloud, "Thank you for the pistol. I guess I'd better take it after all." She flinchingly did so, then eyed it from front to back, from top to bottom, with unveiled abhorrence. Training it pensively on the former owner's chest she asked, "What do you pull to shoot her?"

First Charles Roycroft stepped wisely and widely out of range. He then reached her side by a circuitous track, and began instructions.

"Hold it so."

Taking it, he illustrated.

Stenography had at least done one thing for her—a person never had to tell her something or show her something twice.

She possessed herself again of the weapon and this time held it like a veteran.

"Sight by this mark on the barrel," he continued.

"What do you mean by 'sight'?"

He explained both subjectively and objectively, taking a sportsman's cautious pains.

"Talk is so boring," she mourned. "Can't I begin to pop at something?"

"Be careful not to jerk when you fire," he concluded firmly. "Aim at that white rose."

She obediently did so.

"Now try to hit it," he concluded. "Pull!"

Instead, she lowered the gun angrily.

"Fire into a rose? How exactly like a man, picking out the prettiest thing you can find to squash!" she flayed. "Why, I'd much sooner take a shot at you!"

"I quite believe it," he concurred coolly, "but substitute that loose shingle on the chicken house."

Laurie aimed, fired, and split the shingle.

"What next?" she asked thirstily.

The tutor's interest in his face died out, leaving it distinctly indignant.

"You jolly well bunked me," he acknowledged, chafing.

"Why, I didn't mean to!" she said, startled. She took the expression to stand for a back fire of some sort.

"You tricked me into believing you had had no practice when you are an expert shot," he translated.

"Never fired before in my life," she avowed.

"Perhaps then your success was accidental," he advanced.

"Accidental, your grandmother!" she observed, aroused to idiom. "Tell me what to aim at next."

"That pine cone." He indicated one on a distant tree.

"It jiggles," she murmured distressfully, after patient sighting. "I guess I'll have to pull just after it bobs, so as to catch it when it comes up."

She fired and the cone scattered in fragments.

"By Jove," swore Roycroft softly.

Peter, who had suspended lacteal operations in order to give his entire attention to the firing line, now resumed spooning nourishment into the milk-mussed dot of a mouth.

"Li'l cat, yo' all better do what yo's bid," he earnestly advised it, "fo' yo' missis suttnly kin hit." And this is exactly what Roycroft wanted him and all other negroes to know.

"Folks have tried to tell me it was hard to shoot,"

cried Laurie, "when it's pie easy!" She was very gratified and very pretty about it. "All you have to do is to keep your nerve and use your brain."

"I'll send a man over to rectify that pump," said Roycroft, retiring permanently from the position of rifle instructor.

This little speech of his at once took the happy-go-lucky beam from her face. It went as blank as a slate under a wet sponge. Her reply was given with sudden, low-voiced entreaty.

"No, don't send anyone! You mustn't, really! I might as well speak out. I haven't any money—only what we need for food until we sell the oranges."

He realized even better than she the complete tragedy of this. For a moment he was actually dumb. Then he saw how he could compromise with fate—that is, he fancied he saw.

"Possibly I may be able to start the pump myself," he observed, going towards it.

She slipped the gun into her belt and blocked his way, threatening him sufficiently with the fire of her eyes.

"Don't you dare touch it!" she cried indignantly. "As if I'd let you! As if I'd trade on your sympathy just because I'm a girl and poor, and a fool—yes, a fool! For I got myself into this land-fix by being too much of an idiot to look before I leaped. Do you imagine for one minute that I'd let you do work for me that I've just said I couldn't pay a negro for doing? A pretty wretch you must think me!"

Her excitement attracted him, kindling a trifle in response.

"Would you object very much if I thought you a pretty wretch?" he asked, trying a little experiment

in exuberance. Two debonair dimples appeared in his cheeks, though he would have defended the contrary with his life and honor. In his earlier youth more than one beloved classmate had graduated with a black eye on account of having unwisely mentioned the Roycroft dimple. They did not last long, those disdained clefts. They were gone now.

But they had emphasized a characteristic in contrast with his usual impassivity. They had indicated that he was a man who, when he *did* undertake to interest a woman, or to become interested, would succeed beyond the limit.

But this woman steeled herself.

"Would you have said that in that way to the girl in your watch, Mr. Roycroft?" she questioned.

"That way," took flight with the dimples. He stiffened into a ramrod again.

"No," he answered.

Dishonesty was not one of his habits.

"I know you wouldn't," agreed Laurie. "You respect her because she doesn't work. I respect myself because I do work. Look at my hands." She displayed them to him. They were gashed with scratches in addition to being smeared with rust from the scapegrace pump. "The orange thorns have scored them. You said I'd have to hire a man to cut the water-suckers from my trees, that the water-suckers had to go. Well, they've gone! I did it myself—sheared a whole ten acres."

"You don't say," he commented, impressed.

"I do say. I've found out that man-jobs aren't much harder to do than woman-jobs, and are a lot livelier. Maybe I'll wring a little fun from the pump—who knows?"

She recklessly started for it.

"Peter," said Roycroft deeply.

"Yais, sir, Mr. Rake-off."

"Put down that bursting kitten and come fix Miss Laurie's pump. She will pay you in yams."

The obedient negro deposited the cat in his hat and then went to the pump, kneeling prayerfully and proficiently before it.

"You are a—a prevaricator," murmured Laurie to his employer. She was angry but helpless. "I haven't any yams."

Roycroft raised his eyebrows in remonstrance.

"The prevarication is entirely yours," he said. "Why deny what is in plain sight?"

He pointed to a field-patch that was thatched thickly with green vines more emerald than all Ireland.

"Yams?" She looked at them with kindling pleasure. "And I thought they were morning-glories!"

"So they are. That makes them yams. The yam," he went on, dipping into erudition, "is not indigenous to the new world but to the old. The yam," he concluded poetically, "is beyond all reasonable doubt the potato mentioned by Shakespeare."

"Leaving William entirely out, the yam is fine American eating," summed up Laurie cheerfully, "and I'm glad I've got them. But I could have worried along with fewer miles of them."

Peter stiffly arose to his feet.

"Missis," he crooned with pain and reproof, "all in de hull yearth dat dis pump needs is fo' yo' to put some watter in."

"I don't want a pump to put water into; I want a pump to get water out of," she proclaimed earnestly.

"But yo' has to *fotch* it wid watter."

"Then fotch it," she permitted with serene majesty, and Peter shambled lakeward for juice.

Meanwhile Roycroft's expert gaze had been traveling the grove.

"Have the fall fertilizer put on without delay," was his ultimatum.

"What is fall fertilizer?" she asked. "If it costs money it won't go on."

"It does cost money and it must go on," he said gravely.

" 'What new sorrow craves admission at thy hands that yet I know not of?' " she quoted. But her heart was sinking, going down steadily as a thermometer, for he was frowning determinedly.

"An orange tree is hungrier than a hound pup," he explained. "You have to keep feeding it or you lose it. With this grove in its present condition of starvation you cannot afford to wait, but must apply at the very least calculation a hundred dollars' worth of fertilizer.

"I can't!" She spoke with stolid despair.

"You must."

"I can't!"

"When I say you must I mean it. Mortgage your crop."

"Borrowing from whom?" she asked ironically.

"From me," he answered presently. "This is no time for pride, and no occasion for it. The deal would be a strictly business one."

"Will you promise on your sacred word of honor to foreclose if I can't repay?"

Greatly annoyed he stood silent.

"Then I refuse to borrow," she asserted firmly.

He took another survey of the grove, gaining only surer confirmation of his original opinion.

"You will at least let me send Herman Selig to you, Miss Laurie?"

"What's Herman Selig's forte?"

"Foreclosing."

"He's a money lender?"

"And a Jew, but he is fairly honest. What Jew is not? Of course he will drive a good bargain for himself, but not more than the law allows. Incidentally, now I come to think of it, Selig is an orange contractor, and he may be glad to buy your crop. He's fighting the exchanges. The season promises sixty cents a box on the tree. Hang out for it and you will get it. I am to send him?"

"If it has to be," she answered drearily.

So a mortgage was to be added to the accumulated horrors!

Nor were the horrors yet done for.

"What provision have you made for warming your grove?" Roycroft next asked.

He was speaking more earnestly and urgently than ever.

"'Warming'?" she echoed, disbelieving her ears. "Don't you mean putting its goloshes on and pinning a gardenia in its buttonhole?"

He waved this flippancy angrily aside.

"Face facts like a man, as you said you would," he ordered sharply. "We are not far enough south to make a freeze impossible. That exigency always confronts us and must be met beforehand."

"What's the process of meeting a freeze beforehand?" she asked. The new aches were making her hard and stubborn.

"There are several."

"What's yours?"

"For my own grove I have bought heaters at a cost of nearly two thousand dollars."

"Now I know what's meant by money to burn," she remarked rather indifferently.

Perforce she had dismissed the grove-warming project indefinitely. The mention of two thousand dollars had lifted heaters into Utopia.

But he knew the issue to be too important for dismissal.

"Are those your woods?" he asked, still on the same tack, pointing to an unfenced forest of tall pines near by.

"Yes, and I love every tree of it," she answered, a mother's admiration in her eye as she surveyed the sturdy growth.

The pines were indeed nobly strong, quite giants in comparison with the other trees in the neighborhood, the latter having been bought up in large tracts by the turpentine companies, and now showing the sure signs of bleeding to death under the turpentiner's horrible knives.

Roycroft was looking not at all at the standing timber, but hard at the fallen.

"Have it hauled into your grove without delay, and arranged in piles for lighting, a pile to at least every four trees," he commanded.

Laurie heard and heeded without knowing it, for her eyes had been caught by a glint of calico among her pines.

"Look at that," she panted excitedly, "a girl, a girl!"

"And why not a girl?" he asked, very displeased

with a mind that could find girls more important than grove-fires.

"Good morning, Mr. Roycroft. Good-by. Thank you for coming. Come again and come soon! I'll do everything you say about the grove." Thus she packed her social duties into one bundle and tossed it to him hastily. "But just now I'm going after that girl." And on the word she was off, running like a deer.

After a bored inspection of his deserted environment, Roycroft, catching sight of The McAllister, sauntered up to him for a chat. That gentleman had just succeeded in tugging up by the roots a row of white jasmines very thoughtfully planted by the former owner of the grove in a place where they would blossom to great ornamental advantage, and, in the ghastly holes thus laboriously produced, was getting ready to transplant some cuttings of a ropy, writhing vegetable known as "beach vine," a fearful pest of a thing that had blinded the amateur gardener's judgment because of the immensity of its coarse purple flowers. The dear old man could hardly be blamed for thinking that a plant of such blazingly impudent assurance must have a value to match.

Charles Roycroft, noting, murmured "My word!" painfully to himself, but was too considerate to put his opinions more audibly on record. Even if The McAllister had not happened to be the grandfather of an extremely pretty girl, he would still have been safe from Roycroft criticism, the young Englishman having a very genuine regard for the sensibilities of old age.

"Busy, I see, sir," was the way he began, baring his brown head respectfully.

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"I am none too positive in regard to that fact, Mr. Roycroft," admitted Andrew McAllister, honestly, if majestically. But his grandly severe old face lit up quite beamingly as he surveyed his new friend, and he put his hand fondly on the young man's broad shoulder, a withered, scholarly white hand that did not often permit itself such affectionate familiarity. Being "pawed" by Americans had been one of The McAllister's worst crosses on this free and easy side. Before Andrew himself "pawed," the recipient had to be extremely worthy of it. "None too positive. I fear I make but a pretense of being busy." He looked down rather wistfully at the garden that he had been mangling. "Is it 'busy,' Mr. Roycroft, to be doing nothing, and worse than nothing?"

"Well, sir," said Roycroft dubiously, then, perceiving that "worse than nothing" was merely language in full bloom, and no admission whatever that The McAllister had seen the error of his ways in regard to the jasmine, "Try a cigar, sir."

"Permit *me*, Mr. Roycroft," said the old man, tremendously polite, letting his courtly hand travel impressively towards his own vest pocket, where he cloistered his precious reserves,—though they were getting very low these days. But to bestow a cigar came easier to The McAllister than to accept one—in America.

"It would gratify me extremely to have you call me 'Charles,'" interposed Roycroft gently, insinuating a gold-banded Havana into view.

"Yet more gratify me, Charles, my dear boy," said The McAllister, completely melted. It would have taken a harder heart than his to have withstood the young man's boyish friendliness and sweetness. And a girl not far away would have opened her wide eyes

tantalizingly wider had she happened to witness this fascinating, spontaneous side of her usually stony-mannered adviser.

Andrew ceremoniously accepted the cigar, gave it the compliment of a thorough examination, smelled it choicely, lifted it votively to high heaven as a tribute to its transcendent superiority, then carefully added it to his reserves. Roycroft would have patiently stood out the pantomime even had it lasted for an hour, such was his wistful sympathy for a man so old as to have to turn trifles into one-act plays in order to pad out existence.

"I do all that I am permitted to do, Charles, my dear boy," said Andrew, returning to the topic of his garden-massacre. "But my granddaughter, Annie Laurie —God bless her!—thinks it her duty to forestall me at every turn. The times are for the young." Andrew let his faded but still wonderful eyes rest dreamily and rather drearily upon the distant sky, visualizing it as "heaven." In his heart of hearts he was not as anxious to go there as he had been while in New York, with the thermometer at zero and the radiator in his apartment not much higher. "The times are for the young."

"Yet had Goethe not lived to be eighty we would have known no 'Faust,'" observed Roycroft, taking pains to appear to be generalizing.

"You are right, my dear boy, as always," said The McAllister, removing his eyes from heaven and cheering conspicuously.

"And your Edison——"

"Do not say *my* Edison," begged Andrew haughtily. "Edison was NOT born in Scotland!" He evidently had small patience with Thomas for neglecting this point.

"Great men seem to be the property of all the world," explained Roycroft, carefully smileless. "We so need them. And the nearer Edison approaches to his eightieth year, the more valuable he becomes. Are the times for the young alone, sir?"

"Ha! You score a point," conceded the old man, pursing his lips portentously, so as not to let them break into a smile of pleasure over the implied flattery. "You score a point. But—" practically, and sadly again, "it is not permitted to all of us to work."

"Yet there is a piece of work on this grove that needs you badly," said Roycroft, radiant because he had gotten hold of a piece of real truth.

"Me, Charles?" quavering interestedly.

"You, sir," said Roycroft, clapping him pleadingly on the back as if wheedling a favor instead of conferring hope. His vigorous life poured itself out over the other like a warm blessing, infusing courage, reliance. Under the inspiration of it, Andrew gradually drew himself upright, inch by inch, until he quite towered, pathetically important.

"Mention it, Charles, my dear boy," he remarked, grandly. "What is the work that requires my attention?"

"A fire line, sir," said Roycroft, frowning deeply at the boundary fence of the grove which seemed to have turned itself generously into a trellis for all the dry, inflammable vines in the county.

"Fire line?" questioned The McAllister, densely and somewhat slightingly.

"A fire line must be hoed on both sides of these fences, sir."

"Hoed?" exclaimed The McAllister, quite unable to

connect the humble implement with the important thing so plainly heavy on Roycroft's mind. "Did I understand you to say 'hoed'?"

"To establish a fireguard that is worth the name, one has to hoe and rake the sand absolutely clear of weeds on each side of the fence, two feet towards the road, two feet within the grove."

"Ah," assented Andrew, kindly, understanding none of it. "Ah. Very likely. In fact, quite so."

"I'll prove the need," said Roycroft, seeing that his story would go better if illustrated.

He struck a match and dropped it into the rank grass, dead since the beginning of summer, a dangerous mat that spread for miles and miles. The blaze that at once leaped up raced towards the tinder box of a cottage in a dozen different streaks. As many more writhed menacingly towards the fence. A wolf-like few licked hotly at their boots.

"God bless my soul," piously ejaculated The McAllister, heroically stationary, though his eyes popped.

Roycroft energetically stamped the fiery ribbons to extinction. But it had required all his supple young alertness.

"There!" he said simply. "Now suppose a spark from a chimney . . ."

"Enough," observed the old man, raising two fingers like a silencing pope. "No further words are needed. I see my duty and I shall perform it. The fire line receives my immediate attention."

"I am sure of it. For the present, good-day, sir."

"Good-day, Charles, and . . . and thank you!" A moisture of joy glittered in his old eyes, for here was a man's work at last.

"Not for much, sir," disclaimed Roycroft, smiling

and grasping the offered hand warmly. But he understood.

"Though what should I expect but consideration from a young man who devotes himself to the noble game of chess in a noisy land gone mad over a vulgar ruffianly exhibition called *base*ball!" The McAllister's scornfully hissing b's made base mean base indeed.

"Seen ripping good set-tos, sir, and roared myself hoarse," acknowledged Roycroft honestly.

"Ah, if you could have witnessed some of the cricket matches at Lord's!" murmured Andrew reminiscently, entirely forgetting that he never used to go there. "Cricket! *That* is a gentleman's game."

"But I've known of jolly fine bounders who played it," observed Roycroft, though not so as to be heard, wisely committing the remark to space while wandering towards his canoe. "Poor old duffer!" This he said while tugging at the knotted rope. "Grand old duffer!" This as he stepped into the canoe and shoved it from the dock. Then he sat down and took a few easing sweeps of the oars, sending himself far out upon the bosom of the sweet-smelling fresh water. His strength and youth seemed subtly dearer to him. "Must be beastly for a man to fear he has left off being a man. I'll buck him up all I can."

By now The McAllister grove was far enough away to be viewed at one glance, like a picture,—rather a pretty picture, too, with the sun shining benignly on the shady cottage, and glittering joyously on the shining grove, touching the pine-lands with hazy shafts of light, turning the wires of the fence into a gold necklace, touching up The McAllister with a special shaft of radiance. But Roycroft, being an analytical philosopher, knew that the cottage roof leaked, that

the grove had to be nursed, the fence mended, The McAllister humored; and that one person had to do it all.

"A big handful for one small girl," was his complete verdict. "How long before she finds out she has to drop it?"

CHAPTER V

MEANWHILE, having reached the boundary wires of her grove and leaped them like a colt, Laurie was hot on the trail of her very wild game.

To run fast on a Florida wood-road, leaping pine stumps and dodging small cacti, to say nothing of suffering the awful affection of the sandspur, not only requires ardor, but feeds on it to the final demolishment of that virtue. For the first time in her life Miss McAllister began to detect pathos instead of humor in that classic of nursery rhymes that tells how the carpenter "wept like anything to see such quantities of sand."

"Won't you stop a moment, please?" she finally cried out to the figure which was plodding steadily on ahead. "I awfully want to meet you."

Thus besought and challenged, the maiden, who certainly must have heard her pursuer long before, now came to a diffident and rather sullen pause, turning but half around and standing apathetically at bay.

Even though ungraciously displayed, the girl's extreme prettiness made her a delightful figure, and she was so young that the vivid pink hue of her dress was a *naïveté* of artistic expression rather than a slap in the face of good taste. The dress was of cheap material and was palpably home-made, but it was made according to the very last cry of fashion's note.

This country girl was so exquisitely and tenderly

proportioned that one could but wonder how wild land had ever succeeded in producing her, and, having produced, how it ever bargained with the sun and winds to spare the white and rose of her velvet skin.

The graceful effect of her was not marred even by the incongruous top detail—a man's slouch hat jammed protectingly down over her face.

"I didn't hurt your land any, did I, walking acrost it?" she presently asked, resentfully sarcastic.

Her voice had liquid sweet cadences in it that entirely glossed over the palpable mishap of "acrost," giving her speech a cultivated sound.

"Please, let's be friends," said Laurie, taking her ingenuously by the hand, wasting no time. "I'm so lonely—for girls—and I was afraid I might never see you again if I let you go."

"Why, I don't live but yonder," said the other dryly.

By her defensive manner she showed herself to be constantly at war with circumstances. Very plainly circumstances had badgered her extremely in the past, fostering in her a retaliatory skill. Had she been chased for a trespasser she would have known exactly what to do, but finding herself sought as a friend she was nonplussed and ill at ease.

"I am so glad you live near. Your chimney can't have been smoking lately?" said Laurie, remembering its attribute as mentioned by Mr. Hopkins.

"If it did the smoke wouldn't blow your way," fired the enemy immediately.

"Oh, I never meant that! I meant I never dreamed there was nice company near at hand. I was beginning to fear I was at the end of the world."

"A northerner, aren't you?" asked the new girl with a curl of her lip.

"I'm from New York," said Laurie, unwilling to circumscribe that cosmopolitan center by a point of the compass.

"It's always easier for northerners to find fault with Floridy than to hunt for its nice points. What do they come down here for? Do we bind and gag and transport them?"

"I don't need to hunt," disclaimed Laurie, skipping discreetly over the rest. "I love Florida!"

"Really?" asked the state's champion, smiling slightly. The smile, chasing away the lines of habitual discontent, made her face suddenly charming. "Folks say if you git—get—sand in your shoes you'll stay here for the rest of your days."

"If the sand settles the question I am to be a resident for ever," said Laurie, extending an illustrative foot. Her slipper poured like the glass of time. "See? We're to be neighbors for life, so won't you please tell me your name?"

"I'm Osceola Carter," said the girl, giving the title angrily. Her smile was gone. "Osceola! My folks named me a name they had seen on an hotel. They thought it was pretty. They took it to be a girl's name. They didn't know any better. I had to go to school to find out I'd been named after an Injun—Indian—and a man Indian too!"

"I think it is perfectly great to have a man's name," said Laurie, with a sympathetic relapse into her schoolgirl ways. "I should think you'd be proud of it. I'd be."

"Honest?" asked Osceola eagerly, her doubtful smile glinting out again.

"Honestly."

"I meant 'honestly'!" muttered Osceola, flushing.

"I could understand your dislike of a name if it was a sentimental slush of a one like mine," said Laurie hastily. "Mine is——"

But she got no further.

"I know it already!" flashed out Osceola. She was goaded by some hidden prick. "Yon's McAllister's grove, and you're McAllister—Annie Laurie McAllister. Your name's Annie Laurie."

"However did you know?" marveled Laurie.

"Cal Tandy told me." Over very angry eyes Osceola suddenly dropped her lashes.

"Who's she?" asked Laurie, interested.

Osceola's lashes now swept searchingly upward.

"Don't you know already?" she asked, scornfully doubtful.

"Don't know her from Eve."

"Cal's a *man!*"

"Don't know him from Adam."

"Calhoun *Tandy?*"

"Not unless he's the mailman."

"Cal Tandy's no nigger!" flamed the pretty girl. "He's as proud as proud for all he's poor! Why, he's from Georgia!" After thus establishing the gentleman's rank Osceola went back to the original attack. "And he says he knows you."

"Never stopped in Georgia in my life," announced Laurie. "Only flew over it in a Pullman, and from what I saw through the window didn't fly any too quickly."

" 'Twasn't in Georgia that Cal saw you, but here. He works in Floridy now. He's the foreman of the turpentine camp."

"Those are the people who go round murdering whole acres of trees?"

" 'Murdering's' a powerful grand word to use about a *tree*," scoffed Osceola. To her and such as her the magnificences of Nature were less impressive than the utilities. What was a forest for if not to be bled of turpentine and left to die under accumulation of resinous scabs? "Moreover, Cal Tandy's no more of a murderer than a nigger!"

"Whatever he is he seems to be a ticklish quantity to discuss," observed the city girl.

"He's a mighty good-looking man," described Osceola, reddening consciously. "Thin, maybe, but tall. His eyes are black and his hair is black—so black it looks sort of wet; and he speaks so's you have to listen. Oh, it's easy enough to tell what makes an ugly man ugly, but there's no describing what makes a young fellow handsome, and Cal's powerfully handsome. And"—slowly—"he swore to me that *you* were his sort, that you beat every other girl all hollow, and that you had the whitest skin and the most hair he's seen."

Laurie instinctively wrapped her dignity around her. She maintained a complete silence until Calhoun Tandy's exuberance of speech seemed to pass down the wind and die out of hearing.

"Osceola Carter, you must come to see me," she then said gently. "And I want to come to see you."

"Want to find out how 'crackers' live?" asked Osceola, bitterly pleasant.

"Crackers?" asked Laurie, hunting through her memory for an escaping definition.

"Floridy folks," said Osceola curtly. "Rich people never think they've 'done' Floridy till they study the 'cracker'!"

"Rest assured you'll be safe from me!" said Laurie, offended at last.

"But I want you to come!" cried the Florida girl, catching her breath quickly. "Be patient with me. I'm angry, yes, but not with you."

For a few minutes there was silence in the hot forest—not that forest seems the right name for a sunny tract where a leaf is hardly to be seen, and from whence the tree trunks rise as bare as telegraph poles, with no interlacing of branches to obscure even an inch of the blazing sky.

The underbrush owned the beauty. A languidly waving scrub that looked as if it were made of frayed palm-leaf fans was the most abundant. The showiest wild flower was in yellow clumps of coarse bloom. Everywhere underfoot was a tiny white star of miraculous beauty, secured from being picked by reason of setting too close to a thistly leaf.

"I want you to come," repeated Osceola, after struggling with herself. "I'm as lonely as you are. I'm lonelier, for there isn't anybody in my house that talks to me of the things I want to listen to. I want to think nice thoughts and hear right grammar. I hate being patronized because I'm a cracker. I hate my home. I almost hate my folks. They laugh at me because I stuck to schooling until I got an education."

"What sort did you get?" asked Laurie cautiously. "The right sort oughtn't to make people hate their homes."

"Blame the home, not the schooling," cried Osceola. "My mother chews tobacco, my father loafs, my brother swears, my sister runs barefoot. The whole place is dirt and confusion, and I can't do a single thing."

"Can't you?" asked Laurie, interested. "Why can't you?"

"Ever tried to make over home folks?" asked Osceola, gently ironical.

"Sometimes."

"How did you begin?" more ironically.

"By making myself over."

"Then what?"

"Then I generally found out that all necessary improvement had been completed."

"Would you just as soon take a walk?" asked the little cracker girl, smiling enigmatically.

"Your direction or the other?"

"My direction," said Osceola, shyly offering her hand, which was quickly clasped. "I want a friend," she went on, softened by the contact. "I'm unhappy from sun-up to sun-down. Come home with me, and —then you'll know. You'll see my mother and the rest of them. Come often enough and you'll see Cal Tandy—maybe."

"I've no desire to meet him," cut in Laurie promptly.

"It's Cal's desire that counts," said the other, stubbornly and more or less warningly. "I reckon you'll meet him where you least expect."

As if in connection with this last thought she glanced back over her shoulder at the stalwart pines of the forest they were gradually leaving.

The owner of those woods was scarcely listening, too much enjoying the change of environment furnished by the impromptu trip to "Carter's." Having a guide who knew the way she could revel in the newness of the wood-road without being afraid of getting lost in its everlasting sameness. Not only was the air full of balsam, but every step of the foot released additional supply, for the ground was littered thick with pine

cones. Trust a wood-trail sufficiently, and it will take you *somewhere*, but you are long before you really believe it.

Laurie was something of a botanist, but she knew no name for half the blossoms now in her path. The plan of them was profuse: a single bloom to a stalk was entirely out of fashion. Was your need yellow daisies? One snap of a twig and you held a bouquet that would fill a wash-tub. Then there was a bushy herb resembling a miniature Christmas tree, every inch of which was starred with tiny asters. Generally each aster throned a sleepily fluttering butterfly.

Osceola threaded her way through the display with the indifference of the well initiated.

At last the woods thinned to a clearing—not a clear clearing, but a stump-infested one—and the Carter house loomed into view, hideous as only a country structure can be when not a tree has been left standing to lend it grace.

Except for the front door, which some daring humorist, endowed with half a can of paint in lieu of brains, had tinted an incongruous and streaky sky-blue, the whole house was unpainted, its rough boards showing all their stains and knots unabashed. The dwelling boasted a story and a half, which meant that downstairs was a big room to cook in, and upstairs was a stuffy sloping attic to sleep in. All the windows—if such they could be called without affronting a dictionary—were of a simplicity worse than primitive, being just trapdoors sawed out of the solid walls, hinged at the top, and propped open with sticks. These embryonic dormers suggested that the Carters were fly-proof and mosquito-proof. They also suggested that the Carters became lungless in stormy

weather, for with those trapdoors closed down how did air get in?

The best part of the establishment was its rambling veranda of generous proportions—a sorry best, however, for it was cluttered like a junk shop. It harbored chairs and shoes, a washboard and tubs, a mangled sofa with its spiral insides painfully and menacingly on view, a baby whom nobody but the dog ever noticed—the dog, a black-and-white spotted article looking like a home-made toy, whose first intention was not to deceive anybody into thinking that it *was* a dog; a thin, pale boy with swollen eyes and a paunchy abdomen; a dirty, teasing, laughing little girl in a torn dress, its holes proving conclusively that the garment was all she wore; it harbored lastly Mrs. Carter, a draggled woman who was still young, but whose front teeth were missing. One would think that the fate which takes away a woman's front teeth would take away also her desire to smile, but the entire contrary is so—Mrs. Carter was cheer personified.

Once more to mention the veranda's cargo, it held Mrs. Carter's plants, hundreds of slips growing healthily out of battered tin cans of every size and shape known to commerce. Not only were tin cans utilized, but kitchen utensils. Every time a stewpan sprung an incurable leak, Mrs. Carter sensibly turned it into a jardinière. A jardinière with a long handle has at least one point of convenience. And the way her queerly bunked flowers flourished went to prove that plants like variety as well as the rest of us. A dawn-pink cactus bloomed all over a lard-pail in a rosy profusion to put a florist to shame, and the cactus was only one of many; everything rioted into bud and color. Judging from the labels at the base, the way to spell red geraniums

was "baked beans." Mrs. Carter evidently loved her posies, and her posies loved her, let her be never so toothless.

When the two girls reached this shamble of sociability, a man's back was seen retreating to the woodshed. It might as well be mentioned now and done for that Mr. Carter's retreating back was all an alien ever saw. Whether he feared the possession of a Medusa power to blast with his front view, or whether he was merely of a retiring disposition, there is no one to say. The simple fact remains that Mr. Carter, when approached, withdrew.

The spotted calico dog spread its legs far apart and stared down from the veranda till it convinced itself of the familiarity of one girl and of the harmlessness of the other, then it raced to meet them, its wide ears flapping like carriage curtains and its upper lip smilingly looped back on a serviceable incisor. This expressiveness said plainly, "Here's a joke—a real lady to visit us Carters!"

"Hi, you Jax, quit a-skeerin' the company!" screamed Mrs. Carter, who already was dusting chairs with her dress skirt.

At this Jax apparently sat down to laugh at the idea of his "skeerin'" anybody. His tongue all but fell from his mouth. He was a veritable Mark Twain among dogs. When sufficiently over his amusement to be strong enough to stand again, he did so, and commenced to wag not his tail alone but the whole dog, and thus writhingly led the way to the veranda and seats. Then he dashed at the baby and licked her violently, telling her all about it.

"Ma, this is Miss McAllister," said Osceola, red with pleasure and shame.

"Shucks! don't I know?" asked Mrs. Carter, above subtleties. She wiped her hand on her hip, where records of other wipes remained, and welcomed the newcomer with genuine hospitality. "Hain't we all heard o' 'McAllister'?" She threw back her head and cackled happily through the gaps. "Sot down, honey, and be at home."

"What lovely flowers you have, Mrs. Carter!" said Laurie, mentally renovating her hostess by washing her dress, combing her hair, and fitting her with a set of teeth. Thus repaired, Mrs. Carter would be rather nice.

"When you go I'll give you all the cuttings you can carry," said she, immediately generous.

"Oh, I wouldn't have you deprive yourself!" cried Laurie, hastily.

With the flowers gone what would remain?

"You can't deprive you'self of a good thing by spreading it round," maintained Mrs. Carter stoutly. "Most o' these slips was gi'n me, anyhow, an' in all fairness I'm boun' to pass 'em on. When we first settled here the fam'ly acted peeved 'cause there warn't any view. 'You all save the tin cans an' I'll make a view,' I says, and I done it."

Osceola resumed introductions—the dirty little girl was her sister Tallahassie, the moping boy was her brother Lee.

"I'm named after a city and so's the dawg," volunteered Tallahassie, skipping blithely. She was a bright-spoken, bright-eyed child. "Bet you can't guess what city 'Jax' is!"

Hearing himself mentioned Jax mouthed at the fallen watergourd till he fastened it between his teeth, then he chased wildly around the house with it, and, drop-

ping it, lay down on it, hoping someone would dispute it with him. To those who had to drink out of it later this antic appeared to be merely merry and not unsanitary.

"I give up," said Laurie, referring audibly to the city, and inaudibly to much else.

"Jacksonville!" triumphed Tallahassie. "But 'Jax' is the way the railroad writes it. Jes' you look at a freight box and see."

The moping boy, who had paid but little attention to anything, now picked a piece of rotten wood from a decaying box containing slips that had *not* flourished and deliberately ate it.

"Lee's got the 'big-lazies,'" explained Mrs. Carter, uneasily and glibly. "He cotched it up to Georgy. The whole of what he does is jes' to eat and sot, then sot an' eat again. I raikon I go spread him a cannibal-sandwich right now. That's raw fish on bread," she explained, disclosing her gums in a nervous smile.

She disappeared into the house. Osceola, who had turned red when her brother was being discussed, obstinately stared at the road.

"You are not very well, are you?" Laurie gently asked the boy.

"Did the Board send you?" he counterdemanded. His pasty white face took on a sullen look, and under the excitement of anger his hands and body twitched with symptoms of St. Vitus' dance.

"What does he mean?" asked Laurie of the older sister.

"Lee, don't be more of a fool than you can help," admonished she sharply. "This young lady's only company."

Lee brightened.

"I ain't sick," he told Laurie, almost amiably. He yawned and stretched, saw a choice piece of bark on the porch post, picked it off and swallowed it with relish. "I'm jes' havin' a spell o' bein' tired, an'——"

"Here, honey," said his mother, appearing and shutting his mouth with the cannibal-sandwich. She seemed as anxious to stem his confidence as to fill his hollows. "If I kin fin' a chair that ain't too creachy to hold me I'll sot a bit. Come here, Tal'hass', while I button your skirt." Which that damsel certainly needed.

Osceola in her neatly made and carefully ironed pink dress was a striking contrast to her bedraggled mother and slipshod sister.

Right now Tallahassie was too busy to be buttoned. She was studying tin-can words.

"Look at this. Hain't this fine?" she asked Laurie, dragging out a gorgeous fuchsia blossoming in a tomato can. But "fine" did not refer to the flower. "T-o-m-a-t-o, termattusses," spelled Tallahassie proudly.

"That's a big word for a small girl," praised the listener.

"I tell it by the pickcher," confessed Tallahassie. "But there's a lot more to it what ain't no pickcher for. Look—there's T-o-m, Tom, and m-a-t, mat, and m-a, ma, an' I bet I could find a lot more words to it if I was to went to skule."

"And don't you, dear?" asked Laurie, distressed. The child's tone had been a longing one.

"Laws-ee, no," Mrs. Carter answered for her. "There hain't no skule near enough. An' I don't know as Tallahassie's any the wuss. For what did skule make out of Osceoly? A young miss what we can't

please nohow. Tal'hass', run break me off a bresh."

This command set Osceola staring at the road again. Laurie watched interestedly to find out what "bresh" could mean. Tallahassie, making first a laughing grimace, hopped from the porch, danced to a chinaberry tree, snapped off a twig, and jigged back with it. Mrs. Carter put the twig in the back of her mouth, chewed it to a "bresh," and next stirred it vigorously around in a can that looked as if it might contain carriage varnish. But it was snuff. Then Mrs. Carter chewed the twig again, this time extracting from it a rich reward for her labor.

While tolerantly watching this performance the bare-legged Tallahassie stood on one foot only, scratching hard at the other.

"Quit!" commanded her mother with unusual severity.

"I'm scratchin' my ground-itch," defended Tallahassie loyally.

So far as Mrs. Carter was concerned this explanation was anything but an apology for the circumstance.

"I said quit," she reminded in a hollow tone.

"I got ground-itch, so where's the sense sayin' I ain't?" demanded Tallahassie, pardonably aggrieved.

The sufferers from this complaint have enough to do to endure the pain of it without being obliged to subdue their palliative energies on account of the ultra-sensitiveness of onlookers.

Tallahassie glared at her swollen feet with a species of respect. Not everybody with ground-itch had blisters, and Tallahassie had blisters.

"What are you doing for it, Tallahassie?" asked Laurie, whose memory was inclining her to fear that the child's ailment was anything but a trifling one.

"Scratchin'," replied Tallahassie cheerfully, adding a trifle more darkly, "when I'm let."

"You come to see me, and maybe I can find something in my medicine chest," said Laurie, rising.

"What's your hurry, honey?" asked Mrs. Carter, dissuadingly, as she liberally recharged the "bresh." "Stay a piece longer."

Osceola remained passively silent, evidently in sympathy with any visitor's wish to depart. She even made a move as if to hasten this one by accompanying her to the gate.

"Oseoly, a body'd think you'd never been raised," mourned Mrs. Carter, sincerely disturbed. "You go fetch Miss McAllister some o' my citron preserve and a glass o' pap's grapefruit wine."

Before Laurie could refuse these delicacies—not feeling any too sure of the desirability of food in an establishment where the dog lay on the water-gourd and the *chef* chewed snuff—Osceola was back with them.

When brought, however, they looked disarmingly toothsome, and proved even more so. Laurie, thirsty, was inclined to approve highly of the grapefruit "cider," which was her charitable mental classification of it.

"I wouldn't," said the watchful Osceola, apropos of her guest's second drink.

"Has it gone bad?" asked Laurie, noting signs of fermentation in the amber fluid.

"Gone good," corrected Mrs. Carter, speaking like a connoisseur. "You can get as drunk as a lord on it."

Miss McAllister put down the wine and confined herself to the preserve which seemed, and was, above any reproach.

"What in the world is it?" she asked finally, unable to place it by its flavor.

"Citron melon," answered Mrs. Carter, delightedly displaying all her gaps. "That!" she added, illustratively pointing over the porch-railing to a vine which indefatigably covered the ground in every direction and bore quantities of fruit which looked as if it had started out to be a watermelon but midway in this mad career had decided upon remaining a streaky squash.

"'That trails all over my place, too," said Laurie, gazing at it with growing respect. "I thought it wasn't any good."

"Nothing's any good ef you think it hain't, honey," said Mrs. Carter, gently admonishing. "An' everything in Floridy can be *made* good ef you take 'nough pains. The trouble is you no'therners come down here with oranges on the brain an' can't be cured into seein' nothin' else, even when it's right under your nose. Speculatin' on groves is all right ef you got money back of you, but ef you ain't you better speculate on the scraps, too. Otherwise you'll be presentin' your grocer with all your income."

Appreciation of more kinds of entertainment than one was in Laurie's thanks and farewells when she finally parted from the cracker family, escorted as far as the gate by the brooding Osceola. This latter had remained persistently taciturn during the greater part of the interview, as though determined to let her home events take their natural course unimpeded by any artificial dams raised by "skuling."

"If there is anything in the world I can do for you, Osceola, mention it," said Laurie, glancing backward at the domicile where ministration of several sorts certainly seemed to be needed.

Lee, quite worn out with inaction, had stretched his emaciated length on the sofa, and was indulging in a semicataleptic chew of rotten wood, his deathly white face staring up from among the protruding spirals of his uneasy couch, making him look like an early Christian martyr upon the rack; the baby was being experimentally knocked over by Jax; Tallahassie, one heel in hand, was greedily reading her tomato; Mrs. Carter was reapplying the brush to the carriage varnish; and a thin trail of pipe-smoke issued from the woodshed in witness to the fact that "pap" also was busy.

"If you-all have anything of Ruskin's among your books I'd be very grateful for the lend of it," responded Osceola, kindling.

A velvety softness replaced the sulky gleam in her immense brown eyes as she waved her new friend down the hot and sandy highway.

"Ruskin!" ruminated that new friend, half aghast, "instead of soap! or chloride of lime! or clothing! or medicine! or flea powder for the dog! or *teeth* for the mother! Ruskin! No wonder men think most girls are crazy!"

Then remembering that her own pressing need in a grave agricultural crisis had been a kitten, Laurie wondered what a certain man (and a *very* certain man) had thought of *her!*

CHAPTER VI

"THOUGH a general admirer of sociability I don't care for it in a frizzly chicken," Laurie was forced one evening to tell a member of that species, finding it an occupant of the moonlit porch step where she herself was preparing to sit.

From the extreme depths of its insides it responded somberly by a "chuckle, chuckle, chickle, cluck!"

It being communicative and the girl having absolutely no one else to speak to, she went on, "You should have been in bed long ago. Grandpa goes to bed with the chickens, so he says, and he's been asleep for an hour."

The "chuckle, chickle, chuckle" which greeted this intimated that grandpa's actions were quite immaterial.

"Then move over and let me sit down," compromised the girl.

"Kr-r-r-rrr!" It crooned in drowsing anguish, and made porcupine quills of its already sufficiently outstanding feathers as she shoved it gently to the corner where it soon was at its dreams again.

People whose whole acquaintance with chickens is confined to meeting them at dinner are naturally ignorant of the psychic side of fowls and apt to deny it. Roosters and hens are easier to bake than to divine.

Through the instrumentality of the frizzlies Laurie was often transported far into the maze of biologic research, and emerged from it with the conviction that

chickens could be infinitely more than chickens, especially when they were not wanted to be.

The phenomenon of the frizzlies was a calm craving for being treated like folks. From their moment of discovering that their girl mistress had human heart they flew the coop and followed her faithfully around, assisted her actively in the garden, were present at the most private conversations, devotedly played Jacob at the well whenever their Rachel went to draw water, and at night tried to roost in the trees near the house, having to be collected from them and put to bed by hand.

"And presently I'll have to run a perch-special for *you*," Laurie told her present companion, producing from it a snore-like "kwee!"

After wrapping her skirt very snugly around her ankles to protect them from rattlers and moccasins that were closer in imagination than in fact, Laurie settled herself on the porch step, leaned her head against the railing, and gave herself over to contemplation of the really startling beauty all around her.

Florida's moonlight nights are rich with a witchery too dreamlike to be described. Words would have to be of pearl in order to paint it, and even then those lustrous words would fall but dingily upon all ears not eagerly a-listen for the mystic call of romance. In Florida the moonbeams do not bump into high brick buildings and fall dead upon ugly streets, but they bring the dazzle of heaven undeflected to earth, and leave it free to play for miles and miles among the palms and pines, and across the silver surfaces of a thousand lakes, till even the hurrying hearts of the young cannot journey fast enough to keep up with all its radiant suggestion.

Then, too, on a moonlight night Florida's underbrush has an orchestra of insects with flutes on their wings and violins on their hind legs, and a choir of tree toads that can chirp and trill like tiny birds, so that the argent earth furnishes a fitting fairy music for the moon-ray's dancing. Old indeed must be the mortal who can look and listen without shaking off the shackles of fleshly existence and becoming of "the stuff that dreams are made of."

But out of her wonderful dreams Laurie's sleepless responsibilities kept bringing her sternly back to the actual. Tonight, especially in the glorious moonlight, her grove looked like wealth, its five hundred trees, each standing in its perfect circle of raked sand, standing as trim and orderly as so many schoolboys lined up in waiting to be called into the school building. Laurie had scrubbed every solitary one of those urchins with whale-oil soapsuds—as fishy a bath as she had ever administered in her life to anything. The grove was no longer a shabby orphan; it had an industrious mother and showed it. Not only had it been scrubbed and sprayed, but it had had its wild hair clipped. So far so good, but the benefits of this care would not be accruing till next year, and the best that could be said of the present crop was that it *might* stay on till it was gathered. Every high wind brought down bushels.

"And they are the finest flavored oranges it has ever been my good fortune to taste," was old Andrew McAllister's constant verdict, when he pottered happily from tree to tree sampling the drops, undeterred by their greenness, for nothing improves the quality of fruit like feeling an ownership in it, and the proud words "my granddaughter's grove" were continually on The McAllister's lips. He had really helped her in

the pruning of it, though it was as well for the grove that his muscles had been unable to keep up with his enthusiasm. He was more firmly in love with Florida than ever. Most people yearn for apples when in an orange land, as they yearn for oranges when in an apple land. This one idiosyncrasy The McAllister lacked, therefore in balmy Florida he had not only the food and climate of his liking, but days that were full of sunshine and nights that were peaceful with sleep.

The moon rose higher and more glorious. Laurie had it all to herself without entirely enjoying her monopoly. One of its silvery bridges glistened straight across the lake, connecting her tumble-down dock with the point on the opposite shore whence Roycroft's canoe so often put out. Ashamed of herself for so doing, but unable to control the thought, she began to wish that she might see it now—that he might cross over on that silver bridge—that he might come and sit down on the steps with her and have a little chat that was not entirely oranges. Good moonlight is shamefully wasted that is shared with only a frizzly chicken. Yet Roycroft's interest in her was but the interest of one grove-owner in the fortunes of another.

"For if I were the pretty girl whose picture is in his watch he'd be over here on a night like this if he had to swim," Laurie stoically told Laurie.

A clammy hand was at her heart. She did not like the heavy feel of it. Then she heard something that startled her by its unusualness at that hour. It was an automobile coming up her lane, driving through the sand with a ruthless force that utterly contradicted the likelihood of its being the gentle tin gazelle of Mr. Hopkins. The machine stopped, and a man got out.

Not knowing who it could be, the girl, rising hastily,

located the pistol which she carried in a pocket in the folds of her dress. Roycroft had persisted in his refusal to let her keep it pillowed on a sachet bag in her top drawer, which she had tried to convince him was much the safest place for it.

The man who now plodded towards her through the clear moonlight came too openly to invite a shot, but he was anything but a reassuring-looking object. He was a squat, stoop-shouldered individual, past middle-age, and was hung with garments so loose that they suggested an ill-advised donation. It is sometimes more charitable to surmise that a man has been given his clothes than to accuse him even in thought of having bought such things.

"Good evening," said Laurie, in a tremble, but hospitable. "Do you want anything?"

He took off his hat, but only to scratch his head. Its cropped gray hairs and those of his stubby beard stuck out with the coarse pugnacity of pig's bristles. The personal amelioration being concluded, he firmly resettled his hat.

"It's not me that wants anything," he answered gratingly, "but I've been told that you do. I'm Herman Selig. So you're in trouble, heh?"

"Yes, Mr. Selig, I am in trouble, but not of a sort to prevent you from treating me with politeness," she replied before she could stop herself. She spoke gently, and her tremble was quite gone.

The money lender stood immovable, apparently to let this remark slide from him like snow from a slippery roof. He ruminatingly rubbed the palms of his hands together while he squinted at his customer studiously.

"Suppose then, Miss Laurie McAllister, that you

ask me to come in or to sit down, heh?" was his counter-criticism, every "s" hissing snakily.

She led the way into the parlor and turned up the lamp. The room's old-fashioned furniture gleamed placid welcome from every polished lump and bump. Herman Selig sat down and took a carefully appraising view of everything in sight, beginning with his pale young hostess and ending with the ebony frame of the plate-glass mirror. All the while he quietly rubbed his palms as though rolling an invisible dab of dough into a ball—had there really been a ball it would have come out badly soiled.

The girl seated herself not far from him, but kept a little table between them—an unconsciously placed symbol of demarcation. She waited for him to speak.

"Well, how much do you want, and for what?" he finally asked, hunching his stooped shoulders by way of punctuation.

"I think you must know already from Mr. Roycroft, who said he would ask you to come," she ventured timidly, not at all up in her part. She had never before played a borrowing rôle.

"So! Let me hear it again from you," he demanded shrewdly.

This hint that the two tales might not match made Laurie desperately explicit, and to her great surprise she soon found herself telling her grim companion all her story—of her bereavements and of her subsequent struggles to earn a living for her grandfather and herself, of the old man's failing health and dislike of the northern winters, of her reckless buying of unseen property on the childish hope that it would bring in a big income every year, of her disillusionment, of her determination to conquer a bad situation and wrest at least

a living from the place, and of her immediate need of money to buy her hungry land its food. She broke down under the strain and pain of the telling, and told the last with down-drooped head and quiet weeping.

"That's about all, Mr. Selig," she concluded, struggling to speak without sobs. "I don't know what makes me cry so easily. I've done it twice lately. I think it must be the heat. This is a warm climate."

She furtively wiped her eyes, then leaned her head upon her hand and glanced across the table at him apologetically.

His leathery face was unmoved.

"Yes, this is a warm climate," he agreed, rubbing his dough-ball assiduously, "for some people; others keep cool. I keep cool—it pays. I am to understand, among other things, that you are willing I should buy your crop?"

"Yes, I awfully wish you would."

"How much will you take for it?"

"All you will give," she said. "All that it's worth, I mean. I think I must have about three hundred boxes."

"Between four and five hundred," he stated curtly. "Yesterday I looked the grove over from the road. You were on your porch feeding your kitty, and you had just finished lighting the old man's pipe." This he threw in by way of reply to the question in her glance. "Say four hundred. Listen now! I offer you the full price, a good one—sixty cents a box on the tree when ripe. Take this or leave this. How about it?" He rubbed his ball slowly.

"Oh, I take it," she said eagerly.

"Then sign!" With a quick movement he threw away his make-believe ball, with a quicker he produced from his pocket a prepared agreement, also a fountain

pen, and thrust the first under her nose, the second into her hand. "Sign!"

Worried about it without knowing why, for the written agreement differed in no way from the verbal one, she slowly signed.

He immediately possessed himself of the signed paper and stowed it away in his pocket. The inside of his baggy coat was *all* pockets, some of them pinned with brassy safety pins, converting him into a perambulating set of lock boxes.

"Did you bring the hundred dollars advanced on the crop?" she asked, to hurry him to a conclusion and get through with him.

"I brought the hundred dollars, yes. Advanced on the crop, no!"

He banged out the last word like a gavel.

"No?" she questioned wearily. "Why not?"

"Suppose there comes a freeze first, heh? Then you have the hundred dollars and I get the freeze. No, I advance the hundred dollars on this furniture, old as it is."

His belittling eye was on the spindly, queer table.

"It's a Chippendale," she told him, angered into excitement. "It has been in our family for years! I could sell it for twice a hundred!"

"Very well, sellut," he permitted scornfully, adding with a sarcastic leer, "Who to?"

To whom indeed! The Carters, maybe!

"On the furniture then," finally consented the girl, after miserably convincing herself that her helplessness was fully as great as her need.

"Sign," he said immediately, flashing out a second document.

She took it—a long-winded, bulky paper, bafflingly

worded—and, spreading it before her on the table, tried hard to understand its complete tenor. There was a confusing amount of "whereas," and a labyrinthian repetition of "parties" of separate "parts." Also eight per cent occupied positions of distinguished prominence, and a "neglect" of something entailed a "forfeiture" of something else. Not only did "furniture" appear, but "books, rugs, pictures, and household appurtenances." One might almost imagine that the extremely undomestic-looking Mr. Herman Selig had his future eye upon the McAllister pots and pans, but of course this could not be so.

Intense silence settled down over the lamp-lit room, and sometimes intense silence can be more distracting than a little normal noise.

"I can't make this out," Laurie said at last, desisting from the vain attempt. "I know I ought, but I'm too tired."

"Put your name to it—that's all I asked."

She took the fountain pen again, then with a woman's widespread doubt of the article, tried it first on her thumb-nail to see if it worked. It did.

The thickset moneylender watched her feminine performance with narrowing eyes. It was not often that the meshes of his web were approached by creatures so young and inexperienced.

"Is it safe to sign a paper that you don't understand?" she asked.

Selig scraped the stubbles of his beard with four discolored finger nails.

"It depends."

"Upon what, Mr. Selig?"

"Upon who drew up the paper."

"Oh," she breathed, her face clearing magically,

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"I'm glad of that. I'm sure you wouldn't take advantage of anybody who is as ignorant of business as I. I've already got into enough difficulty by relying on my own judgment. It turns out I haven't any, so I'm going to rely on yours instead. Give your word that this paper is safe and sensible for me to sign, and I'll do it. Is it?"

He frowned down at the document and frowned down at her trustful face, seeming to find the one as annoying as the other. Then he walked softly across the room and assayingly pressed his thumbnail into the ebony frame. When satisfied of its integrity he glanced back at the girl, who was waiting for the assurance of his word.

"If you want the money you can sign," he vouchsafed curtly.

After a disconsolate weighing of this she signed. The mortgage was immediately taken away from her and stowed into a lock box—one with a safety pin.

Then Selig paid into her hand a hundred dollars in soiled ten-dollar greenbacks, first folding each down the middle lengthwise, and jerking the ends to make sure that no bill was two.

The money seemed dismally inconsiderable compared with the size and scope of the mortgage.

"When do I have to repay this?" she belatedly asked.

"The time was down in the deed."

"Yes, but there was lots in the deed that I didn't see."

"When you rely on a person's word you do it fully, heh?"

"Yes, they can rely that way on mine."

"So? It remains to be seen. Four months is when you have to pay it back."

"Four months is a short time for saving so much."

"Any time is short time when money is to be paid back, but to the lender long. I take my leave."

He opened the screen door for himself and strode out upon the porch, she following him, remembering a feathered duty there.

She had been made so indefinitely unhappy by the events of the last hour that the moon no longer seemed to shine as brightly as it had, and in consequence the dark places of the grove looked very dark indeed, the shadows of the barn especially so.

"Come with me while I put the frizzly chicken to bed," she besought the money lender.

"Heh?" he asked, held up by the friendly tremor in her voice no less than by her timid touch upon his baggy sleeve. Then his slits of eyes did their usual keen duty, and, discovering the brown drowser upon the step, he understood. His worst enemy could not call him a fool, or slow. "All right," he said, pronouncing it very close to "all riot."

This was no bad term for what it really was. The frizzly, on finding itself hugged by its mistress and borne through the night, took the hour and the fact to mean that its head was going to be cut off, and squawked accordingly.

Though Selig accompanied the pair down to the chicken house, he sheared the act of much of its courtesy by availing himself to the utmost of the spying privileges afforded. To take a profitless tour was not in his nature. The yam patch drew him to its very side, and while Laurie was fastening the door upon her calmed fowl he booted open a hill of yams, and, bending down, carefully examined the output.

"I think likely tomorrow you get a letter from me,

Miss Laurie McAllister," he told her while escorting her back to the house.

"Do I have to?" she asked blankly. "Why letter?"

He refused her a reply, simply nodding her a curt farewell, then plodding onward to his car. She soon heard him pounding remorselessly through the gentle night.

Next morning brought the letter. When Laurie walked to the road-gate the whole flock of chickens, including the rooster, went with her. Meeting the mail-man was a sociable affair. This particular morning was an October one, but it looked and felt like June-time up north, for the air was hot, with bees buzzing busily everywhere and butterflies lazily wandering. And the heavenly fragrance was of June-time too—so many roses were in bloom, native ones, preferring quantity to style. One Cherokee ran along the fence for fully thirty feet, making a glossy green wall starred plentifully with tiny buds promising to be big-hearted white flowers a little later on.

Just now the most blossomy thing in the neighborhood of the Cherokee rose was The McAllister, who, clothed in glorious remnants of the wardrobe of his youth—remnants long laid away as relics of the past, but now gladly untrunked for splendid service in the present—was faithfully hoeing the fire line prescribed by Charles Roycroft. Andrew had a good cigar in his mouth, a pearl-colored Fedora hat upon his head, and a white belt around his middle, to say nothing of an astonishingly well-preserved linen suit upon his person.

The frizzly chickens kinked their necks at him doubtfully, possibly thinking that a man with a hoe, though admirable in poetry, might be unsafe when turned loose.

They hung around Laurie. The rooster, as a time-killing experiment, jumped in the air and tweaked a rosebud off its stem. The taste of this young delicacy, in a land where succulent leaves are rare, pleased him so tremendously that with excited gobblings he jumped and tweaked off a bud for every hen in his harem, presenting it to her with quite an air.

"Doesn't it beat all how *gal-lant* them frizzly chickens be?" asked their former owner, slowly thudding into the scene on mule-back. He hunted through the saddlebag for mail. "I dunno how come them so 'cep' they cotches it f'm me and my ole 'ooman; they allys come into d' kitchen an' sot on d' wood box and listen to we-all talk. Whoa, Balaam!"

To whoa Balaam was a superfluous duty. The moth-eaten mule understood whoa-ing better than anything else. Moreover he whoa-ed so instinctively at sight of a letter box that it was always a hard matter to get him past a bird house.

"*Balaam?*" asked The McAllister, severely removing his cigar in order to articulate with fearful distinctness. His hobby was accuracy in other people. "Does the name bear any reference to the Biblical incident?"

"Wha's that, colonel?" asked the old darky, putting on his horn spectacles to facilitate his hearing. From the benign elevation of the mule's back he looked at the aristocrat with the pitying sympathy of any strong intellect for a person who sits down to hoe, for The McAllister was on a box. "Wha's that? Oh, Biblical incidence. Yas, sir."

"Can it be possible that you are unaware that Balaam was the name, not of the ass, but of his owner?"

"No, colonel, it can't," politely answered the old

colored man, making ready to go. It is safe to be mild with maniacs, but safer to get out of their vicinity. "Howsomever, in *my* jedgment Balaam was de ass on dat occasion, so I perpetually scarify him by 'flicting my ole mule wid his cognomen. Get along, Balaam!"

During the tilt Laurie had been handed her letter, and she was now reading it for the second time. Mr. Selig was at least brief; he said:

> If you can get your yam crop dug and sacked in two weeks, three at most, I have a market for them. How about it?

She walked slowly to the back of the house, and looked hard at the field where the sweet potato vines matted themselves over a blazing hot acreage. To her first glance the task looked too much even for Hercules, with all his god-uncles and god-aunts to help him. As for herself, she did not feel sure of being able to dig two rows in two weeks. For one thing she did not know how, nor did she exactly know what was meant by "sacked." For her to think of hiring men to help was utterly out of the question, and equally out of the question was letting slip a chance to make some money. She knotted her two hands into fists and surveyed them.

"Help me," she begged them earnestly. "This thing has to be done, some way. But how? I'll think it over while feeding Little Eva."

Little Eva was the idiot kitten and had christened itself by once having ravenously worked at a can of evaporated milk till the first three letters of the label had gummed themselves to the side of her empty head.

The white kitten's eyes were still pale blue, and were matched by a blue neck-ribbon whose bow was generally untied and trailing between Little Eva's front legs. The best return Little Eva could make for being the most pampered pet in the county was to look as maltreated and unhappy as possible. It had reached that stage in staggering exploration where its chief aim in life was to tumble from the porch to the sand below, there to sit dazedly with an expression on its pale face of having been kicked.

Picking up this innocent, Laurie carried it to the pump-curb and fed it there. Her mind took a zigzag journey back through the near past, which journey, since it also began at the pump, ended most naturally with Osceola Carter.

"The very girl for a yam partner!" cried Laurie, inspired. "I'll go see her about it."

A second time Laurie was on her way to the cracker's home, not finding the trip as lengthy as at first. There's nothing that shortens distance in Florida like knowing your road. It is then possible to take a cut-off without fear of accidentally giving yourself six extra miles.

She must have been seen by the Carters before seeing them, for when she reached their stump-strewn "clearing" she was again in time to observe the dignified subsidence of Mr. Carter into the woodshed.

The others of the family had temporarily deserted the veranda for the yard, there to congregate more or less closely around a tripod-supported iron kettle in which Mrs. Carter was making soup out of a sort of turtle which she indiscriminately called "gopher" or "tarrapin," according to which term tumbled through her gums first.

These hard-shell reptiles of ferocious aspect but Arcadian dispositions wander freely over the state, seeking mostly their own entertainment, generally expiring against their wills under the planter's ax and being thrown to his chickens.

The Carter chickens, not to be defrauded of the whole of their rights, had appropriated all that was unfit for the kettle, and, since two chickens went to every one bit of entrail, were tugging themselves in pairs all over the premises.

Tallahassie was striving to cut her initials in the turtle's erstwhile roof. Osceola, pretty and reluctant as usual, was grudgingly reading a soup receipt from a book which looked as if it had been dipped into everything that had ever been cooked by its help. Bribed by a promise of enough cannibal-sandwiches, lanky Lee was restfully splitting wood to keep the pot boiling, and was extracting further reward from the wood itself, for every time he laid bare a vein of resin in the billet he gouged it out and ate it.

The only wholly bored member of the family—the forgotten baby being asleep—was Jax, who, conserving all four of his legs to the utmost by holding them in the air, lay upon his spinal ridge and took stock of the proceedings only by rolling his eyes.

"My, but you're busy!" smiled Laurie, walking into the group. "I'll say what I have to say and go."

"Not till you've tried some of this, honey," stated Mrs. Carter, always hospitable. She was drenched with perspiration and soup, and smeared with turtle and soot, but not to the extent of knowing it. "Gopher ain't presac'ly the right turtle for tarrapin soup, but lawsee! if you can't snow white, why, snow pea-green, that's what I say."

"Maw sutt'nly has snowed pea-green this time," yawned Lee. "You look."

Thus incited, Laurie peered into the kettle to the establishment of Lee as a wit, for the broth was pistachio-hued indeed—as sickly a looking compound as ever smelt deliciously to heaven.

"No, thank you," she said, in answer to Mrs. Carter's invitation.

"That's because you don't know what's good," observed the cook, easygoingly. "But it'll spile, Lee, if you quit a-choppin'. Lord o' mussy, boy, keep awake! I never see a body take hold of a job more 'come day, go day, God send Sunday'!"

The sufferer from the "big lazies" stretched himself and went to work again. As a wood-chopper his methods were his own, and leisurely. He first set up a backlog, then he unhurriedly selected a piece to be chopped, standing it up against the backlog like a child in a corner, then he more carefully selected a third piece to lie lengthwise at the child's feet; after this was fitted he raised the ax a bit and let it fall of its own weight—five falls to one split. Sometimes the haft of the ax went into the cleft instead of the blade, and these times always scored successes. In Lee's hands the ax handle was a keen cutter.

Against the tattered and splattered background of her own family Osceola's neat prettiness stood out in vivid relief.

"Thank you for the Ruskin. It came in the mail," she said. She was still in a dress of artless pink, but it was a clean, new one, and even smarter in cut than the former. Her relatives were in their garments of the week before. "Oh, if I only had the money to buy books of my own!"

"How much are yams worth a bushel?" asked Laurie, more apropos of the general subject than Osceola seemed to think.

"Yams? Why, they are worth—how much are they, ma?"

"From eighty cents to a dollar and a half, honey," answered that genie of the caldron, stirring briskly, "according to the season."

Mrs. Carter was one of those highly uneducated people who, fortunately for the educated, know everything not to be found in an encyclopedia.

Laurie then outlined the object of her present visit, getting immediate consent from Osceola and practical information besides. The sacks could be ordered by mail and would come by boat. The yams would have to be washed to secure a price.

"And I'll wash 'em for nex' to nawthin', if you'll let me," threw in Tallahassie, sparklingly.

"Me too, jes' so long's I can fish off your dock 'tween whiles," observed Lee, swallowing a yawn.

"And you-all keep 'em covered with some sacking, fast as they's dug, so the blue jays won't peck 'em to a sponge," advised Mrs. Carter, speaking strongly, as all speak who know the jay.

"I'll be around at sun-up tomorrow," promised Osceola, when preliminaries were ended. "We'll start right in. Thank you for giving me the chance to earn some money, and to visit your place—where it's different!"

With her mind as full of affairs as her hands were full of Mrs. Carter's slips and cuttings, Laurie got halfway home, and more, before she knew it. Then came a point when she became conscious of hearing astonishing sounds—men yelling profanely one to the

other, snatches of roaring songs, axes crashing into trees.

What could it be, and where could it be, this ribald disturbance of the piney silences?

CHAPTER VII

THE answer to her mental question soon came, and came with a force that stunned. For after she had left the highway and taken the wagon-trail leading through the pine forest, she found, upon coming to her own wood, that that sacred place was the one that was filled with the roisterers. It seemed to be alive with ruffians who were each putting a beautiful tree to the knife. The turpentine gang! So this was what the cracker girl had anticipated when she had warned Laurie in regard to the probability of meeting Calhoun Tandy where he was not expected!

Momentarily bereft of speech, angered to the point where a man "sees red," the girl who owned and loved the trees stood ragingly contemplating the marauders.

They were as rough a set of men as ever formed a turpentine camp, which even at its best is seldom composed of the pick of male citizens, but generally consists of the law-hating wanderers of all climes. The turpentine industry needs strong and hardy men—men able to get along without the comforts and refinements of civilization. That sort is nearly always content to get along without the restraints of civilization, too. This particular set of them was neither better nor worse than it was expected to be. Some of them had decent homes to go back to when the season was over, some of them were deserters from home, some

of them were recently discharged from stone and iron homes placed over them by the State.

But all of them could work. The testimony to this fact was the injury they had already inflicted upon Laurie's long-leaf pines. Upon the smaller trees the nail and cup system was being used. Skillful "guttermen" were scoring open deep veins in the bark and driving a spike into the bottom of the vein to guide the drippings into the little pail that was hung to the spike.

The larger trees, though, were being treated to awful butchery. Each trunk had two workmen, a left-handed one and a right-handed one, who wielded their "hackers" with appalling results. The hacker is a knife with a curved blade whose murderous power is strengthened by a sort of cannon-ball attachment to the handle. The V-shaped double gash which these knives "scarved" went perilously near to the heart of the tree. At the base of this gash, which began as high up as the men could reach and ended but a few inches from the ground, the guttermen were cutting troughs in the tree itself—not only arranging for it to bleed to death, but making it collect its own lifeblood in readiness for the still.

And since a fire is the last thing that a turpentine company wants, they guard against it by having one at the first, destroying all undergrowth. Laurie's wild violets, due to carpet the forest with blue in February, were writhing in several of these fires.

"Stop!" she cried ringingly.

The silence and obedience which immediately followed were merely the temporary result of curiosity. A turpentine man is always ready to take a rest and have some fun. These glanced amusedly at their leader.

He was leaning against a tree fitting a disabled knife

back into its handle. He was a raw-boned but symmetrical young giant of tremendous strength and uncurbed passions. Such was his rather dignified air of being sure of himself, of his competence and potency, that he wore his blue-jean overalls and open-necked, loose shirt like a uniform. He had piercing dark eyes and hair so black that it looked "wet," as Osceola had said.

"I know you," challenged Laurie, going up to him, face to face. "You are Cal Tandy."

"I know you," he responded, smiling across the knife. "You're Laurie—McAllister."

The flash of this smile, insolent of intention though it was, made him strikingly good-looking.

"How dare you come here?" she went on, her anger turned to quiet fury. Never before had she heard the "Laurie" mentioned in just that way. It made her realize that she was woman and he was man. "How dare you bring your gang here?"

His annoyingly handsome face hardened at the repetition of dare, but he continued to smile and to mend the knife. However, he answered:

"If you-uns is going to make me discuss all I dare do we mought as well sit down to it. It 'ull take some time."

The men broke into appreciative laughter that had the merit of being an impartial tribute to mirth. True, their leader had scored. But the girl was pretty. Allegiance belonged to each, without disloyalty to either.

"Send those men away, and you go with them," she insisted. "These trees are mine. I won't have them *touched* again. Do you hear me?"

"Sure I hear," he answered enjoyingly. "Aren't I

a-listening? Keep the music going." He tested the knife, found it to be in working order, then, as if his occupation had been his real reason for granting a cessation of the destruction, said firmly, "These trees belong to the company. They was boughten months back. Hit it up, fellows!"

His leadership was indisputable, for at his command the blades in the trees hacked downward and the bleeding gashes grew. And the rowdy, but apparently necessary songs, commenced again.

The activity and confusion had the effect of hedging the two chief belligerents around with privacy—as though they were having a ballroom chat in a corner.

"'Belong to the company'?" she repeated, daunted for a second. His entertained expression enlightened her. "You are not telling the truth," she accused, "and you know it. This land is mine."

"Then you've only got to prove it, haven't you?" he asked carelessly.

"Yes, and the proof will be easy!"

"But slow," he pointed out, with insolent truth. The law's slowness was the reason for his lack of concern. To Cal Tandy the law was a grand machine for furnishing respite to the guilty by saddling the innocent with the burden of confirmation. "By the time the law has given you back your trees I'll be through wanting them."

"Maybe, but I won't be through with *you*, Calhoun Tandy!"

"I'm sure pleased to hear *that*, Annie Laurie McAllister."

"I can still have this robbery punished!"

"Ye—es?"

"Yes! do you suppose I don't know better than to

think that a band of miscreants can destroy my property and go scot-free?"

"No—o. But we 'miscreants' scatter mighty lively when the time's ripe. And after you've collected us, some years from now, will it be so easy to prove that we's the ones? No—o. I see from your face that you think my way at last. So I reckon we miscreants will go on and take our chance today."

"Then take it at your risk," she warned. "This land is mine and I'll protect it."

"How?" gently taunted Cal. He was losing interest.

"With this."

She drew her six-shooter.

"A girl and a gun," mentioned Cal Tandy casually. It was as he would have mentioned a baby and its rattle.

"A girl who can use a gun," she corrected, able now to do a little smiling herself. There is no sex about a six-shooter. "See that pail?" She aimed and pulled the trigger. The pail kicked itself from the spike and hit the ground. Cal's reawakened interest flared up. As for his men, the shot had acted upon them like a noon whistle. Admirable quiet had fallen. Laurie's remarks had no difficulty in being heard. "See that man's cap that he has thrown on a bush?" She fired again and the cap slumped dismally with a double hole through its crown. "*Now* I'll shoot for somebody's knife."

At this every man but Calhoun Tandy jerked himself behind a tree.

"Shoot for mine," he said, as angrily cool as she.

With the desire to bluff by defiance he extended the arm whose hand held the broad-bladed tool.

Put on her mettle the girl swung the gun around and took extra careful aim. Her deliberation seemed like

hesitancy, and Calhoun laughed. Then the knife was shot from his hand.

He let his tingling arm go slowly back to his side.

"I couldn't 'a' done better myself," he commented, deeply drawing his suspended breath. His lean, powerful chest heaved curiously once or twice, and there was an eager something in his face that conclusively proved his sensations to be not those of cowardice.

"Say, boss, wot we better do?" droned someone invisible. "She's got three shots left, and ef we come out, zing! she'll nick an ear, zowee! and she'll git an eye."

"You are perfectly right," exhilaratedly announced Laurie to this unseen one. Her cheeks were pink, and she held the gun in readiness with a steady hand.

"You must quit, fellows," drawled Cal Tandy, keeping his eyes fixed upon the girl's face. "Quit and go. I want to have a parley with the enemy."

The men reappeared, indulging in much grotesque, good-natured pantomime of being terrorized, but they gathered up their belongings and sauntered off, stamping out their fires as they came to them.

"Don't you ever shoot at a knife again," then ordered Cal Tandy masterfully. "You're like to kill yourself if you do."

"Myself?" she asked serenely.

"That's what I said. I've not got over being scared for you yet."

"I am able to do my own worrying, Mr. Tandy."

"It's late in the day to mister me," he reminded her, registering his point with another of his enhancing smiles. "You've called me by my first name twice."

"Let us keep to the point of the parley—will I have to get out an injunction against you, or have I suffi-

ciently established my right to the woods and my ability to guard them? For, after I shoot one of your men here and kill him, there won't be the least difficulty about my 'collecting' him afterwards, will there?"

He turned away his head to hide a sudden spasm of laughter. Cal Tandy did not mind being caught laughing out of devilry, but he considered it unmanly to be caught laughing out of mere amusement. Then he bethought himself of a retaliation which might harass, and he employed it.

"Have you'uns a license to carry a gun and to shoot?"

"In this country when a girl has *cause* to shoot she owns all the license she needs. But tell me about my woods, please—are you going to keep out of them?"

"I'm going to keep *my men* out of them."

"That's wise."

"But not because you popped a little gun. It's because you talk spunky and look pretty and shoot straight." He dropped his heavy lids over his eyes in practical illustration of the fact that the scenery did not count so long as she filled his range of view, and he lowered his voice to that subtle notch in the man scale that accompanies passages of endearment. "Yes, you talk spunky and look pretty and shoot straight—three things I admire in a girl. I admire your name too; I like to say it—Laurie. And now I'll tell you something else——"

"You needn't," she said, feeling fear for the first time, for she knew herself to be suddenly defenseless even with three shots left. One cannot fire a bullet through a compliment. "We've told each other enough. I am finished with you now, and I am going."

She turned on her heel and endeavored to make her

word good, but he detained her by unceremoniously putting his hand on her arm. The strong touch was not yet a grasp, but she knew it would become so if she did not stop and listen for the "something else." She therefore paused and pantingly awaited it.

She wondered why this sinewy giant of a mountaineer, not being angered by restraint as she was, should himself be breathing heavily. She objected to seeing the regular heave of his chest under the rough shirt, too open at the neck to be decent on a man. Physical exhibits of masculine strength—which she had often paid gate-money for and viewed delightedly from a grand stand—were offensively disturbing close to. The heart of Cal Tandy was a dynamo engine that worked the belts and wheels of a very busy factory. That it should shake the frame a bit now and then, under stress of extra labor, was to be expected.

"The something else is this—when I find time I'll drop in on you-uns, to see more of you," he finished calmly.

She shook his hand from her arm and faced him with dignity.

"In my part of the world gentlemen never call on a lady till she invites them," she cuttingly stated.

His answer to this was given with an especially flashing smile. A lock of his wet-looking black hair had fallen into his eyes, and he shook it back into place with an arrogant toss of his head.

"Mebbe so, but my part of the world is Georgia. There the *men* do the courting."

CHAPTER VIII

AFTER dismissing himself in preference to being dismissed, Cal Tandy strode onward through the pine forest, coming out as soon as he could upon the main road. Within his inexorable limitations he was a natural philosopher, liking the open highway for the reason that it gave his mind a chance to travel far, even though his feet might never follow. He had come from Georgia, and those who come from Georgia always go back to her, drawn by the love of her bare red hills, and longing for a smell of new-mown Georgia hay, cut from grass so high that a standing man can hide in it.

But going back to Georgia often takes a number of years. The secret of content is to accept from an alien land the pleasures of it, and to a person who does not care to be cooped up under a roof those pleasures mostly come, as they mostly go, by way of the open road.

Though the woods had not done so badly that morning! Cal went over the events by himself, remembering every word that had been said, and tingling anew under the excitement of them. They might sound dull enough to an outsider, as "chickery, craney, crow" sound uninspiring to anyone out of the game. The thrill of them belongs only to those who know that sooner or later somebody is going to be tagged for "It," and the chase started.

Cal Tandy was willing to chase a girl only in order to satisfy her own fancy for that pastime. He himself acknowledged no necessity for it. Girls were manifestly put in the world for a man to take when he got ready. The law of life placed them among the things that he needed—first a dog, then a gun, then a horse, then a hut, then a wife. Girls were trained to side-step when a man came near, but they quieted down under the rein.

These equine comparisons were introduced to Cal's busy brain by the fact that he was watching the approach of a rider on a very fine horse. The man and his steed—coming with that leisureliness that is required by a thermometer that stands at ninety-eight degrees Fahrenheit—were knit together by the fine bonds of a thorough understanding, and of both owning the marks of a perfect lineage. The horse was a glittering bay, in shining trappings of yellow leather that gave a wealthy creak with every stride, and the young man who rode him was a credit even to such a horse.

Cal Tandy, whose state has sent more good horses and good men into the world than the world generally remembers, eyed the two with proper appreciation. When they came up he gave a brief pull at his cap.

"Howdy, Mr. Roycroft!"

"Morning, Tandy," said Roycroft heartily, drawing rein. The big bay nodded her head easingly in graceful curves. "How's turpentine?"

"How's oranges?" After delivering himself of this skillful repartee the Georgian backed up against a convenient pin oak and made the tree help him to stand. In Florida the man who knows how to rest all over lasts longest.

"Oranges are coming on!" said Roycroft cheerily.

"Turpentine isn't," said Cal, stoically enjoying *this*

repartee by himself. He could not wring from his saturated mind the picture of the enemy and her gun.

"Well, your season's over and mine is beginning," observed the Englishman.

Cal looked up piercingly, then dropped his full lids again. He had almost forgotten that they were talking of turpentine and oranges.

"By the way, Tandy!" said Roycroft, breezily remembering something.

"Yes, sir?" The "sir" came from him, not servilely, but in recognition of the patent fact that there is caste among men. All women were merely women, but there are men *and* men; for instance, was not he, Tandy, above his laborers? Yet above him was a boss, and that boss in turn knuckled down to a better-dressed boss with more money in the bank. The system was universal; its existence could not be denied except by a fool, and Tandy was no fool.

"Whereabouts is your still, Tandy?"

" 'Bout five mile northeast, to'ds the railroad track."

"Get along with you, Tandy! There's no railroad within twice that. I wish there were! A railroad would make this section the richest in Florida."

"I mean the single spur track laid by the turpentine company. Thinking of paying a visit?"

"Thinking of buying a barrel or so of waste. How much is it?"

"Three dollars."

"Can't shave the price a bit, Tandy?"

This question was so unlike the liberal policy which had won Roycroft his hosts of friends that Cal Tandy gathered something from it.

"Not buying it yourself, Mr. Roycroft?"

"No; I'm going to suggest the use of it to my neigh-

bor—for her grove. Four or five barrels would be needed. Twelve dollars or more. Humph! what queer things brains are, Tandy; I still have to figure in shillings before I can find out whether a sum is much or little!"

The part of this speech that concerned itself with brains was promptly dismissed by the mountaineer.

"Laurie McAllister your neighbor?" he asked with a slight drawl.

"In Florida we are all neighbors, Tandy. Yes, I meant Miss McAllister. Her grove is in a deplorable condition, though she appears not to realize it. Yet she may, and is striving to make the best of a discouraging situation. She is a brave girl. I am on my way there now with some news about the fruit situation."

Again Cal sidetracked nonessentials of business. Etiquette had the floor.

"Did she give you an invite?" he simply asked.

Charles Roycroft smilingly surveyed the horizon in a bit of brief reminiscence, recalling the ardors and rebuffs of his first visit to "McAllister."

"Can't say that she did," he admitted, gnawing his lip to restore his gravity. "But, Tandy, when a gentleman feels that he can be of service to a lady he does not wait for an invitation."

Cal relieved the pin oak of his pressure. He could not see where he could be benefited by remaining. Evidently the ways of a gentleman with a lady were the same as the ways of a man with a girl, and the differences between a swell Londoner and the foreman of a Florida turpentine camp were mostly external; the inside male was an absolute quantity, not affected by the number of starched shirts the individual owned. Cal

acknowledged Roycroft's high caste without malice and without a particle of envy. He enjoyed a brief chat with this handsome Brahmin, but grew bored with too much. The speech of the élite was all crust and no meat. Except that he would have cared to own the horse, Cal experienced no desire to change places with Roycroft in the social scale. For one thing he could not have stood hot leather puttees on his legs nor a stuffy tie around his neck. Without doubt, too—since Roycroft always looked cool and clean, regardless of a thermometer and a dust that invariably rose together—he had to garb himself twice a day. For a real man this would be punishment.

Still, knowing that a girl was just as apt to encourage an imitation man as a real one, especially when the real one had turned his back, Cal threw out a little hint calculated to hasten Roycroft's return to his own preserves.

"An orange grove is mighty like a rabbit; you lose it if you take your eye offen it. I wonder how you can afford to ride around so much."

"Talking rabbits, was that one you shot at a while back, Tandy?"

"No, sir."

"What then?"

"I wasn't a-shooting."

"But I heard shots; didn't you?"

Cal glanced reflectively down at one of his big brown hands, the one that had held a knife.

"Yes, I heard 'em, powerful close."

Cal's reticence sprang from magnificent indolence. If the girl was going to inform on him she would save him just so much labor.

"As for my grove," went on Roycroft, though he

was plainly still endeavoring to account to himself for the shooting, "I am fortunate in being able to leave it with a Peter. He's as honest with my work as with my money."

"An *honest* nigger?" asked the Georgian, supremely aghast, though evidently with no intention of detracting from the race. Just so would he have caught up the mention of a feathered crocodile. "What do you-uns mean by an honest nigger?" His drop back to provincialisms proved his mind to be too engaged to guard against them.

"By honest I mean honest," smiled Roycroft, then, edging on his companion, he ingratiatingly asked, "What do *you* mean by an honest negro?"

"A nigger who won't steal a thing 'ceptin' he sure needs it."

With this profound contribution to biology Cal sauntered off, omitting verbal leave-taking as superfluous. If your friend did not know you were gone until you told him he obviously was not of a caliber worth considering.

Roycroft glanced after him with admiration, liking all big animals, whether wide-antlered elk, huge bulls, or tall turpentiners. What placed Tandy's humanity behind a mist was the fact that he wore brogans. They finished him socially as definitely and cloggingly as they ended him in the flesh.

Upon reaching his intended destination Roycroft, perceiving Laurie among her trees, tied his horse to the fence, vaulted that fence himself, and walked down a citrus avenue to meet her.

Hatless and with her hair braided in two long braids which were brought over her shoulders in *Marguerite* fashion in order to get them out of the way of the knap-

sack that was strapped to her back—the knapsack holding the spraying solution—she was treating her most afflicted children to a curative bath, administering it through a rubber tube with a bulb attachment. Thus equipped she looked like a lonely little soldier doing sentry duty all by herself in a land where formidable Nature threatened at any moment to step in and slay her.

Seeing Roycroft, the girl straightened bravely under her unfeminine burden and called out, "I'm squirting this thing without much knowledge of where it's going or what it's doing, but I'm faithfully squirting it."

His sympathies were deeply stirred by seeing her thus in single-handed combat. Of course he had known she was obliged to do the work of the grove, but his knowledge had been the rainbowed theoretical one which never bears the least resemblance to the incongruous actualities of fact.

Quite bereft of the genial cordiality that always gratuitously suffused him when he was with men, he merely mentioned curtly, "Everything you are doing will show for improvement in the long run. Keep at it."

Translating commendation into command she industriously squirted the spray.

This was not exactly what he had meant.

"Where is your grandfather?" he pursued.

This was not exactly what he meant either, but at least it brought him nearer to it, for Laurie stopped work and opened her eyes to look at him. She had kept them shut from lack of confidence in the sticking powers of the spray. So far in her experience with physical laws, what went up had to come down, but,

as Roycroft had said before, the impossible flourishes on an orange grove.

Her reply was pictorial, unaccompanied by words. She squirted a little envoy of spray down a citrus avenue running at right angles to the one by which Roycroft had approached. There, at the end of the avenue, like a pleasing view at the end of a kaleidoscope, was a picture of the old gentleman peacefully smoking on the porch of the house, and happily contemplating a chessboard in expectation of "Charles, the God-blessed boy!"

Roycroft took out his watch and glanced at it. The valuable was one that Laurie could never see without remembering that it held another face beside the one around which its hands traveled.

"Yes, I have time for a game," he announced, putting it back into its chamois with his usual care. "But what I really came for was to tell you this: when Herman Selig calls to see you, as he promised me he would, do not dream of accepting any price for your oranges under seventy-five or eighty cents the box. That much is being offered for them now, and is being refused. The idea is that they will go much higher."

"Mr. Selig has been, and I have let them go at sixty," she said blankly. She was too fair and square and brave to add "as you told me to."

But he mentally scored it to her credit. It showed him that her former tilts with him had been mere exuberance of vocabulary, not hostility.

"There is still time to hold out for the right price," he said.

She shook her head till the shining braids undulated.

"I signed a contract," she admitted. "Shall I tell you how it all happened?"

"If you will be so kind," he responded very gravely.

The account that she gave him of the interview did not result in removing his gravity. For a fact, by the time that she finished the recital she herself was not particularly happy over the sound of it.

"Please explain the mortgage to me more fully," he asked, after a disturbed pause.

"I can't," she admitted guiltily, feeling as silly and simple as six years old. "I practically signed that mortgage without looking at it. All I know is that I have to pay back the hundred dollars in four months at eight per cent or lose my furniture."

More and more perturbed, he walked away a few yards, then paced them back.

"Are you sure it is the furniture only?" he asked.

"There seemed to be millions of other things beside furniture," she confessed. Then, one exaggeration leading to another, she added, "The mortgage paper was a mile long."

"Which should have made you all the more cautious," he pointed out. "Miss Laurie, *why* did you not read that document through?"

"I was very tired, Mr. Roycroft; tired and frightened. And so—I trusted him."

"Without rhyme or reason!"

"I had a reason," she advanced timidly.

Though this had a fairly hopeful sound, Roycroft was still suspicious.

"*What* was your reason for trusting him, a notorious bloodsucker?"

"He called the kitten a 'kitty,'" she faltered. "I noticed it right away. It had a sort of honest sound —not at all bloodsuckery."

"My word," murmured Roycroft, quietly anguished,

looking her over as though searching for one glimmering speck of sanity and not finding it.

"If he weren't honest would he have helped me by securing me a market for my yams?" she questioned.

"Has he done so?"

"So he says. He has ordered them from me."

"And paid for them in advance?"

"Of course not."

"Of course not! But gave you a written promise, such as he required from you."

This was uttered with an affirmative inflection that turned it into irony on ice.

"No," she said restlessly. "I see you rate him for a scoundrel."

"Not till he proves one."

"I have the hundred dollars," she mentioned meekly, hoping to turn the caustic young Englishman's attention to the needs of the grove, away from the lacks of its owner, and succeeding.

"Can I be of any assistance to you in preparing a formula, or formulae, for the application required by these trees?" he asked.

She was a young person most difficult to help as a rule, and he offered the present suggestion, as he had offered those in the past, from behind a high earthwork of reserve.

But on this occasion, since the offer did not involve a use of his valuable money, time, or muscles, but only of his apparently worthless intelligence, she saw no reason for refusing.

"I awfully wish you would," she answered, glowering with annoyance at her famished trees, "for *I* don't know whether these things want a hot dog or a soup sandwich."

Though unacquainted with the specific nature of these American foods, he was acquainted enough with *her* to assume safely that they had nothing to do with the case, and he froze accordingly.

Feeling herself sent to Coventry she sprayed a tree with artistic concentration. The vanquished who can immediately find occupation enjoys twice the peace of victory.

"You can overdo that sort of thing," he warned coldly.

"But I've only just started," she explained. "I was occupied in an entirely different manner half an hour ago."

"Were you in the woods shooting?" he asked. The idea had been uneasily haunting him.

"That happens to be it," she replied, visibly impressed by his psychic powers.

"Were you—having any trouble?" he asked, the psychic powers holding out.

She quickly considered this question, then came to the conclusion that her success with Calhoun Tandy had been a singularly easy one, much easier than she had expected.

"No trouble at all," she announced.

"Rabbits?" pursued Roycroft, indulging his need for thoroughness.

"No—o."

"Doves?"

"*Mercy*, no!"

"Merely shooting at targets?"

"Yes," she answered, with the pleasure of a candid soul that gets a chance at last. "Shooting at targets."

He was silent for a moment.

"Then you wish me to see to the expenditure of the

money, making it cover the cost of labor as well?" he asked.

He magically infused into this change of topic the accusation that she possessed too little integrity at that moment to make the other topic worth continuing.

"Yes, please," she answered dismally, flinching under the implied charge.

"Trust me, then, to attend to it." He carefully lifted his cap, bowed stiffly, switched his riding crop under one arm, and prepared to seek the chess table.

All in the flash of a moment she arrived at the disconcerting conclusion that his good opinion meant worlds to her, that she really hardly cared to live without it. She wanted no more. Just his good opinion, of course. But she couldn't live without it, she couldn't live without it! His silent comradeship was all that made the hardships of her present situation endurable. While he stood by her side, everything seemed to go a little easier. That was the only way she could state it to herself—things went a little easier. When his bright brown eyes looked at one of her wilting trees, she felt quite sure that it would start right in to freshen up. The sound of his resonant young voice was always as inspiring to her ears as the cooling splash of the pleasant lake, as the strong song of a bracing wind. For his sake—because he generally had one in his buttonhole—she loved the homely little "Florida flowers," pale pink, scraggly, periwinkly things that blossomed contentedly, almost eagerly, in waste spots of sand where even grasses disdained to grow. Somehow it was like him to favor this usually despised flower, and lift it from the ignominy of its low estate to the honor of dying on his manly chest—doubtless he ad-

mired it for its rugged honesty. Honesty! Oh, dear!

"Mr. Roycroft," she murmured, tremulously.

"Miss Laurie." He turned and stood staring at her, whether defiantly or deferently it was always hard to tell.

"You didn't like the—the way I answered you—a little while ago."

"I hope I have not implied to you that it is any business of mine to intrude upon your private affairs."

"Has that remark anything to do with what I'm speaking of?" she asked, wishing she could manage once in a while to place her prepositions in the middle of her sentences instead of at the end, where they didn't elegantly belong—so the grammars said. Roycroft's prepositions always went so obediently to their right rooms!

"Would it not be presumption on my part to like or dislike your way of answering?"

"Would it?" she asked, vaguely. Why did he get so oddly angry with her, she wondered. Those sparkling eyes of his were now blazing, bewildering her with their depth and brilliancy. "Stop snake-charming me," she ordered, getting angry in turn.

"It is your privilege to answer as you please, especially to discourage my vulgar curiosity!"

"Don't be nasty," she begged meekly. "I know that you only ask—ask things in order to help me if you can."

"Then why do you not reply to such questions with equal sincerity and kindness?"

"Suppose I had told you I had shot at a man who annoyed me, what would you have done?" she asked experimentally, smiling in spite of herself. It was easy

for her to be cheerful when cheer was annoying to Roycroft.

"Found him and horsewhipped him."

"Oh," she said, blankly, the smile fading. She instinctively knew that Calhoun Tandy was the last person in the world to be horsewhipped and not kill the whipper.

"*Did* you shoot at a man?" asked Roycroft, straightening out the arm that hugged the riding crop.

Now a knife is not a man; the meanest kind of an intelligence is aware of that.

"No, I didn't, I really didn't!" she cried, anguished to find that in her quest for honesty she had circled back to the same old lie and that Roycroft was leaving for it a second time. "Wait, wait," she cried, finding herself weakly near to tears. "I know that it is deceitful to pretend that something is so when it isn't, but is it as bad to pretend that something isn't so when it is?"

"Is this a veritable question, or another 'soup sandwich' proposition?" he asked firmly. "I should like to know before attempting a reply."

"Oh, Mr. Roycroft, I only want to say that often I take life as a joke because I don't dare take it any other way," she went on intensely.

In her voice was a subtle ring of sorrow that caught his attention and tamed the glare of exasperation in his fine eyes.

"I often pretend that things aren't so when they are," she hurried on, "not to be annoying to—to anyone, but because if I looked always on the frightening side of life it would sometimes be too hard for me to bear. I am speaking only the literal truth, Mr. Roycroft, life would be too hard for me to bear."

Unable to go on for the second, she stooped and, picking a lonesome little Florida flower from the weeds at her feet, busied herself straightening out its kinked edges.

Dropping his boyishly long lashes over his eyes, he industriously flicked the toe of his boot with his riding whip, frowningly silent. Like most men, he was made as uncomfortable by too much sincerity as by too little of it.

"If I broke only myself when I broke down," she continued, gently, "it wouldn't matter so much, but it upsets grandpa too, upsets him dreadfully, and that does matter, so it's largely for his dear old sake that I keep on pretending that things aren't as bad as they are. Right now they are very bad."

Here he lifted his veiling lashes to give her an agreeing look.

"Even you, Mr. Roycroft, who know so much, don't know *how* bad. The winter is near and my money is almost gone. But that is not the worst; the mortgage is what is haunting me, for there is something wrong about it."

From the sudden cut he gave his toe, one would have thought Herman Selig was using it for a bed pillow.

"A hundred dollars is not much to own but it is a fearful lot to owe," she concluded sighingly, now trying to curl the Florida flower back into a bud again. "So, when anything extra comes up in the shape of a worry, I have to pretend a great deal—which often makes me appear to be lacking in common sense and honesty. But, believe me, Mr. Roycroft, packed away somewhere, I have a little of both."

"Ah? Thank you for letting me know," he observed, very distinctly and pleasantly.

She started to say "Yurelkum" in imitation of Peter's garbling of the conventional acknowledgment of thanks, but stopped when the double-edge of her companion's remark struck home. She flashed an indignant and astonished look at him.

"Anything to prevent me from doing a bit of pretending myself?" he imperturbably inquired. "I fancy it would be a most consolatory habit to acquire, don't you know."

Done with him, she dropped the durable Florida flower to the sand where it lay quite fresh and pleased, and, taking up the neglected nozzle again, commenced implacably spraying.

Whereupon he sauntered away to the house to employ himself for an hour or so in the hard task of losing a chess game on purpose without being caught.

CHAPTER IX

THE entire Carter household, with the exception of its head and feet—that is, always granting that Mr. Carter and the baby held those relative positions—arrived at the McAllister grove bright and early the next morning to initiate its young owner in the mysteries of digging a yam crop.

First came Osceola, pink-gowned as usual, but more than usually pretty and vivid owing to the business and social importance of the occasion.

"It's going to be drudgery, Miss McAllister," she warned, while the two girls were in the barn selecting such implements as might be of help, "so I thought it would be a good plan if we learned some poetry while we worked, and I've brought 'Locksley Hall' along."

" 'Laurie,' if you please," said Laurie ingratiatingly. "And though it rather strikes me that learning 'Locksley Hall' would be drudgery added to drudgery, still I don't mind trying it. Certainly the first line is appropriate:

" 'Comrades, leave me here a little, while as yet 'tis early morn!' "

" 'Tain't," said Tallahassie, entering the conversation and the place with equal abruptness. "S'eight o'clock."

Since she had been up since four drawing water for the family wash she naturally felt that the day had

advanced, but it had evidently not advanced to hair-combing time.

Jax had come too, but was giving his attention to Little Eva. He was "pointing" at her with considerable concentration, and from the expression on his face was trying to make out whether she was a kitten or a caterpillar. The terrified hump to her back made either supposition probable, and neither of them likely.

Later along came Lee, six feet tall if he was an inch, but so lackluster of eye and unhealthily pale of face as to look very much more like a stale codfish than a potential man. The ambition which led him to Laurie's barn deserted him after landing him there, and he sank subsidingly upon an inverted pail to chew his nails and brood.

"If you are going to sit you might as well sit and fish," said Osceola impatiently, trying to point him to the dock.

"Whatever I cotches," he said, gesturing somnambulistically to Laurie, "I'll guv to she, for *her* knows how to be pretty and NOT stucken up."

"Are there fish in the lake?" asked Laurie, interested, though there seemed but little probability since the boy did not move.

"I'll show you," vaunted the intrepid Tallahassie, approaching her brother and producing fishing tackle from his pockets, going through them all for that purpose without any more resistance from him than if he had been a corpse.

When equipped she dashed down to the dock as fast as her bare legs could carry her, and, to do her justice, it must be said that she kept at it till she landed more than one bass, pop-eyed, big-mouthed things that, when

hooked, came swirling across the top of the water fighting like sharks, but sank into a state of polliwog meekness upon finding out that the game was up.

Meanwhile Mrs. Carter reached the grove, toothless amiability personified. Her skirts were soaked to the waist as a result of her morning's work, and the transparency of their wetness showed that she wore two or three of them, all different lengths and colors, each one eclipsing the other for fade and sag.

"Here we air, and we allus come like Brown's cows—one a-hind the other!" she sang out cheerily. Then she covered her gums with reproachful lips, immediately taking note of a sign of wastefulness on the grove. "Laws o' mussy, honey, you' guavas is a-droppin'! Why don't you turn 'em into jell?"

"Jelly of those things?" queried Laurie dubiously. She looked without much favor upon the straggling bushes and their strong-odored fruit—bushes that looked as if they had rather wanted to be trees, and fruit that was mostly skin, seeds, and smell. "They taste like cabbage pie!"

"But the cabbage biles off, and pie ain't no name for what's left," insisted Mrs. Carter, already gathering guavas into her held-up skirt.

She carried her point and made the jelly, ultimately consenting to Laurie's proposition to "go halves"; she made shelf after shelf of other toothsome compounds, as time went on. She had a positive gift for evolving something out of nothing, and was moreover a picturesque economist, deploring the use of more "when enough was a-plenty," saying she "never saw no sense in plasterin' butter on bacon."

Later on she told the girl how to market her pecans, how to make grapefruit candy, where to sell the broken

yams for cattle-feed, and how to boil up the roots into a hot mash for the frizzly chickens, "and sot 'em to layin' better by warmin' up they innerds."

"Your mother is wonderful," Laurie told Osceola this morning.

"Especially at grammar," observed the daughter with quiet bitterness.

Laurie's reflections on the justice or injustice of this filial attitude were cut short by the crowding exigencies of the yam-digging profession, superinducing a positive respect for the astounding vagaries of that vegetable. Truly, to "know beans" is an esoteric expression lifted high above slang; to know any vegetable's private life is to have taken big strides into a worthwhile education. That education loses a trifle of its fullness if it has to travel up a hoe handle, and thrills the student better when it enters through his fingertips.

When once plunged into the tangle of emerald vines that covered the deeply furrowed yam patch with a level sea of leaves, the two girls soon discarded their rakes and hoes as too cumbersome, and literally embraced the earth, sitting down on the hummocks and groping into them with their hands as the only sensible way of following up the trails of a sweet potato with a wanderlust.

The country girl worked with stolid industry, interested only when "Locksley Hall" was part of the curriculum, and totally unable to share in the city girl's enthusiasm over grim nature at close range.

"It seems so fascinating and queer to dive into yellow sand and find it black inside, doesn't it, Osceola? And didn't you think that sweet potatoes grew on the end of a stringy root like white ones? I did. It's quite

exciting to find that they are only bulges in the middle of a root. Then where do you suppose they get their pale pink color from, hidden away from the sun and air all this time? And oh, Osceola, look at this one! A regular monster, as big and pinky as a puppy dog! There is as much adventure about this as hunting for Captain Kidd's gold—for you never know whether a hill is going to have two or twenty in it."

"'Tis the place and all around it as of old the curlews call,"

prompted Osceola, taking advantage of the first lull.

"Dreary gleams about the moorland flying over Locksley Hall,"

sighingly contributed her fellow-scholar, extremely loath to exchange yams for Lord Alfred.

Prodded onward by potatoes and poetry, the hot morning traveled to hotter noon, bringing the workers to a state of limp exhaustion and inducing them to accept with relief Mrs. Carter's suggestion that they "knock off till four."

Surveying the result she told them they had "did real famous," and truly the compliment was not undeserved, for the heap of unearthed tubers was considerable. Tallahassie, after her fishing orgy, had ridden many of the yams in the wheelbarrow to the edge of the lake and had treated them to a bath, bringing them back pinker than ever and in possession of an increased market value.

"Say, whilst you two been gibberin' 'bout the 'grand results o' time' I *done* it," shrilled the tousled-haired little child, caressing one of her bare heels and beaming

proudly at her bathed potatoes. "Doesn't they look most good enough to chaw inter raw?"

"They do indeed," answered Laurie, who was too deep in a new perplexity to be more voluble in her praise. "How in the world are we ever going to get these things down to the boat landing at Perseverance City? I am afraid the cartage is going to cost us a soul-harrowing penny." For nobody had a horse.

"Now stop a-worriting over your death till you're dead," advised Mrs. Carter, "then you'll find some'uns else 'll do it for you. Le's go home, chilluns, an' l'arn what pap's did to the baby."

"Yes, it will do us all good to rest and dress," counseled Laurie, glancing discreetly at the older woman's still drenched skirts.

"No use rollin' you' pretty eyes at me, honey," said that cheerful, toothless one. "I ain't got no other clo'es to my back, nor to my front either, far's that goes. When I were young an' fussed-up folks named me a crackerjack for looks; now I'm only cracker."

"You are still young." Laurie launched herself into the opening eagerly. "Fuss up again and see if you aren't!"

"Laws, honey, haow, when I ain't got no clo'es? What with the baby, an' the cooking, an' Lee to nuss—the poor boy—and that all, seems I cain't ever git no time to sew. Well, I'm off! Lee's gone this luttle time, an' Tall'hass', an' yonder goes Osceoly; so now me —Brown's cows agin."

Deserted by her cohorts the mistress of McAllister's grove sauntered to her pine bungalow, experiencing in an ever-renewed stream her initial enjoyment of owning "grounds." Twenty acres is much or little according to where you have come from in order to take posses-

sion of them. If you have come from a New York flat you can open your arms to twenty acres with the Monte Cristo greeting, "The world is mine!"

The bungalow, sprawling contentedly in the shade of its trees, commanded several views which did not wholly do outrage to the term "vistas." Having a self-respecting contempt for a Florida road it turned its back to it, preferring to face the sparkle and freshness of the lake which in the morning reflected the brightness of a thousand suns and in the evening stretched away in placid dusky pools, broken only by the riffles made by minnows when they jumped. Though the road view had its good points too, being glimpsed through a double avenue of oleander and magnolia trees, ending in a gate of a summerhouse variety inasmuch as it was roofed and owned two rustic benches; in a land where handsome posts can be had for the chopping, architectural effects can be had for the wishing. To the right were the woods of long-leaf pine, where the cones fell like rain and the banners of moss streamed in the wind, and where the quail walked without fear, calling clearly to each other at dawn, especially when a shower was coming.

Encircling all these riches ran Roycroft's outlying lands, his vast pasture fields and young nurseries where thousands of budded stock and seedlings were springing up in a thick grass which had been left rank in order to furnish certain properties of humus for the soil, also to protect the infant trees from cold. These outlying fields were so far from his grove proper that he himself was rarely seen in them. Peter did the work.

And here was Peter now approaching with a few ripe papayas in his hands. A papaya—for those who

are ignorant and would like a really scientific description of it—is a fruit which tastes like a forty-second cousin of a cantaloupe, and profusely hugs the central stem of a plant resembling a hollyhock gone mad. But put pepper and salt on the papaya and eat it from the inside out with a spoon, and you forget its botanical oddities.

"Pawdon," remarked Peter, with an admirable copy of his cool young master, "you-all speculate yo' kin use dese?"

"I certainly can! Thank you!"

"Yurelkum."

"Are they yours, Peter, or Mr. Roycroft's?"

"Dey ain't jais what yo' might call mine, Miss Laurie."

"Then maybe you ought not to give them to me, Peter."

"Deed so, Miss Laurie! A whiles back I say, 'Mr. Rake-off, I'se gwoin' see wat Miss Laurie thinks o' dese 'payas,' an' I tek particular notice he ain't say I ain't."

"We—ell, thank you again, Peter."

"Yurelkum, but me an' Mr. Charles Colin Rake-off don' require no thanks f'm no lady, miss."

"Colin?" she caught up the new name interestedly, finding it less stiff than the old; "less of a mouthful" is the way she phrased it to herself. "I did not know that his middle name was Colin."

"Dat's jais a few of his name," replied Peter, rubbing his wool to disguise a pride so great that it threatened to enthuse him. "Over in Yurrup he got a name as long as my whup-lash, an' lef' mos' of it dere, fotchin' on'y wat he reeley need to Floridy."

"I am glad he brought Colin, Peter; it is a very nice

name," she answered, continuing on her way to the house.

But he politely detained her yet another moment.

"Miss Laurie, is you' chickens de ones wid de rugged brown foliage p'inting ever whichaway for Sunday?"

"Yes, Peter, that describes them very well."

"Den I bring you in one f'm de field. She done stole she nest, an' got a fam'ly all hotched out fo' you."

"She can't have much of one," argued the girl, "for I haven't had chickens but five weeks, if that."

"Quantity don' make fam'ly; it's de style dey has. She's two. I'll brung 'em over to you-all's barn."

"Thank you," she replied, angling for the reply.

It came.

"Yurelkum."

Laughing, she ran into the house to find her grandfather with watch in hand and a papal look on his old face which seemed to suggest that he lived on the food of the spirit alone—sign that he was famished for a substantial meal.

"There has been a most extraordinary female here all morning, my darling," he announced, following the flying young mistress to the kitchen.

"That was Mrs. Carter, grandpa, and look at what she has done!"

Neatly arranged on the windowsill were glasses of warm guava syrup, hardening imperceptibly to jelly.

"It is a very good color," granted the old gentleman, autocratically. "But the female—pardon me, my dear, I should say your friend, Mrs. Carter—persisted in conversing with me, though I had never met her, and she mumbled through gums so astonishingly toothless that I failed to understand the half of what she said; whereupon she asked me if I were deaf, but called it

'deef,' which is a pronunciation for which I find absolutely no excuse. I have pity for the one who asks me if I am deaf, contempt for one who calls it deef, without the least desire for the company of either."

"Grandpa, I'm making further discoveries—she has kept up the fire and baked some yams and fried the bass. Dinner's ready!"

"I prefer you to call it luncheon, my dear; nobody dines at this hour."

He trotted back and forth between dining-room and kitchen while the meal was being transferred, thus furnishing himself with a thorough impression that he had assisted in the preparation.

"Dearest, don't you think this is a kind of fairyland?" she glowingly asked him when they were finally seated at the flower-decorated table. "One set of people donate the food—look at the bass and the papayas—and another set of people come in and cook it for you. All you have to do is eat. Aren't you beginning to like Florida?"

"I am *continuing*, my darling Annie Laurie. I began to like it from the first moment of my arrival, and have increased in that liking from pleasant day to pleasant day. All my life I have wanted space and peace and kindly solitude, broken only by visits from such a friend as young Roycroft, for example; for years I have yearned to end my days in a land of sunshine and simple plenty. I did not speak of these things before, my dear, for your frail shoulders were bending beneath more than they should have borne, brave little orphaned girl, with an old man to feed and to be an added burden——"

"Grandpa, don't, dear!" she cried, startled at receiving so solemn a reply to her light question. "Bur-

den? Why, instead of being my burden you are my wings, for I would never have dared fly so far on my own alone. If you are contented here then I am happy, so that settles everything. Now let's eat."

"Oh, you young people, you live in the depths and talk of the surface, while we who live on the surface talk of the depths, so neither can understand the life or the thought of the other. The bass is delicious, my darling."

The knowledge that he was genuinely fond of the place added as much to her care as to her comfort, keeping her continually wondering what was to become of him if the winds took the oranges and Selig took the furniture. Both possibilities were staring her straight in the face. They were not in the least the phantoms of hysterical fancy.

Mrs. Carter's advice not to worry about your death till you died was admirable in its own particular line, but was of obviously no assistance to a person who had to keep on living after a calamity struck.

The perplexed girl shut her troubles inside her own heart, however, and entertained The McAllister with an account of the doings in the yam field, being obliged to talk very fast in order to head off his clucks and "Tch's!" of disapproval at the idea of her being in "trade"—a term of contumely which he never once dreamed of applying to the orange industry. Apparently what was plucked from a branch was not half so degrading as what was grubbed from a root.

Then she finally settled him in a big chair for his forty winks, and, after washing the dishes, ran out before changing her dress to look for the hen with the brown "foliage" and the "fam'ly."

True to his promise Peter had brought the errant

mother home, and she was now careening fussily around a small inclosure, very nervous about the change of scene, and stepping frequently on one or the other of her two "stylish" infants.

"Get off it, for a *non compos mentis!*" implored Laurie, seeing the hen increase its foot pressure on a shrieking chick while frantically examining the horizon for an explanation of the shrieks. "There! you've hurt it. The poor little thing."

She bent over and watched with helpless pity the tiny chick trying to regain its feet and failing. One of its pin-like legs was badly injured.

"Pull yore gun, I'm hyar," drawled an insolently amused voice in the mellow darky tones that so many Georgia whites unconsciously use.

She slowly turned around to find her uneasy convictions verified in the unwelcome shape of Cal Tandy, who, with hands in pockets, was leaning against the barn corner and irradiating a general impression of having plenty of time to spare. Cal Tandy's leaning was never in the nature of one who needs support, but of one who conserves to the full a perfect strength. There was always pride as well as insolence in his attitudes. He belonged to a race of mountain-folk who boast to this day that in their veins there runs no mixture of foreign blood.

The girl, who dimly sensed his own idea of his own importance, declined entirely to take him at that valuation, and was far more irritated by his bold good looks than pleased by having them in her vicinity. He was so tall that it annoyed her, symbolically, to have to look up at him.

"I should think you would be at work," was the best she could say.

"So long's you *do* think o' me, I calc'late I don't care *what* you think," he observed, undiscouraged.

"I didn't think of you till you came," she carefully elucidated.

"That's why I came." He carelessly looked over her head at the sky. "I aim to have you do a little thinkin' of me after I've gone."

She wished that she had remained inside and had dressed. Not that she minded being apprehended by him in her short working gown, with her hair in braids over her shoulders. Not at all. But in the other event she would have been in the house and free from him.

Then she thankfully remembered that this refuge was still hers.

"If you have nothing particular to say I am going in," she mentioned in a gentle society tone.

"I've one partic'lar thing an' that's stay whar you be," he answered, letting there be no mistake about the order. To that tone the most unruly of his men had learned to buckle under.

"Is that your idea of being polite?" she asked, unintimidated, not perhaps wholly because of bravery, though she had plenty, but because of having had experience only with men who courteously allowed her weakness to subdue their strength.

"No, it's my idee of bein' special," he answered, again trying to hide the smile that her unexpected bravado aroused in him. "Don't dare me to skeer you, Laurie McAllister, for I kin do it."

Quite sure of this without being told, she tried by restoring her attention to the hurt chick to prevent her opinion from becoming public.

"Leg's broke," diagnosed Cal, glancing where she glanced. "Want I sh'd kill it for you?"

He lunged upright as if to make the offer instantly good.

"Don't you dare touch it!" she said indignantly. "Man's kindness is the most brutal thing on God's earth!"

"Woman's pity's brutaller," he said, laughing, somberly. "She'd more lief hev a critter go maimed the whole of its days than deal it a just stroke. I know women."

"You don't! She'd sooner cure than kill!"

"Play up to yore words: cure that critter."

"I can't," she confessed.

"Wal, I kin. Go fetch me some thread and a twist o' cotton."

Too interested in the experiment in surgery to protest against the rough tone used to her, she hurried into the house and soon was back with the articles asked for.

Meanwhile he had whittled a shred of pine into tiny splints and was ready. Feeling himself to be admittedly in command he had even less compunction than before about being "special."

"Pick up the critter," he ordered. She did so, smoothing its ruffled down in an attempt to convince it that it was in safe hands. "Bring it hyar." This also she did, wondering at the softness that the darky drawl brought into his voice. "Step up closer." Again she obeyed, and renewed her old dislike of hearing Cal Tandy's powerful heart at work. "Hol' it steady in yore two hands with its li'l leg out straight."

When this final order was executed to his satisfaction he began bandaging the snapped member in its cotton-wool and splints. His sprawling big hands, brown without and plentifully calloused within, worked over

the tiny limb with surprising dexterity and lightness.

"All that the good Gawd gave to this teeny chickun was its legs, and it beats me to see how He can stand f'r 'em bein' broke. It beats *me*. Mebbe with a big ole chickun I could stand it, but I declar I hate to see any li'l thing robbed of its show." As he spoke he was winding thread in even coil around the splints to hold them firmly in place.

Midway in the critical job he called a halt, placing in his pocket the spool from which he was winding, thus connecting doctor and nurse by a cobweb line that could not be ruptured without danger to the patient.

"What now?" asked Laurie, placated into friendliness.

But he succeeded in slaying that friendliness at its birth.

"This now," he answered, taking one of her braids in his hand and stroking it with the other as if it had been a bird.

"Please put it down," she asked as composedly as she could, though she felt as outraged as if her hand or cheek were being stroked.

"It feels jes' as I figured it would, satin soft and alive," he pleasantly observed, still petting the strand.

"You don't know it, of course, but you are being rude."

"If I don't know then it can't be rude."

"Consider it from my point of view, please. My ways are not yours."

"But mine's easy to learn."

Her carefully kept patience now flew.

"You are not so simple as you pretend to be. I can tell from the way you speak. When you are keeping

guard over yourself you talk very decent English; when you let go you talk like a——"

"Geor—gy cra—acker," he drawled helpfully. "I was feared you-uns might say nigger."

"And now you are forcing me to stand an indignity because you know I won't jerk away for fear of further hurting this little hurt thing. You are not fair!"

"Whenever you hear of a man playing fair with a girl you can bet on one thing, and that is he's hoping to lose out." Cal Tandy was still fondling the strands of hair, when, chancing to glance aside, he saw something that induced him to restore the braid to the shoulder where it belonged, and to pick the spool from his pocket. "Os—ce—oly Cyar—ter or I be da—am," he murmured thoughtfully. In just such a tone would he have acknowledged the advent of a mosquito, and then killed it.

By the time the very self-conscious and very pretty new arrival had come up to the pair he was again winding thread around the splints, doing it with steady hands and preternaturally surgical absorption.

"For mercy sake," ejaculated Osceola, after discovering for herself the ins and outs of the operation. Her luminous eyes were fixed upon the little chicken, but her wave of color sprang from more than clinical interest. "Do you aim to mend it?"

"Howdy, Osceoly," observed Cal punctiliously.

"Howdy, Cal." She fell naturally into his speech, but her words were broken by a flutter of emotion that was conspicuously absent from his.

"How's y' pap?" No rising inflection accompanied this ritual.

"Just the same, I allow, thank you." The shy tumult in her young bosom was rather painfully evident.

The other girl was faintly shocked at so guileless a display of feeling, not understanding how any man could arouse it, and not approving at all of the lack of self-control that would permit it to become so visible. She was distressed to be shown through the instrumentality of a girl whom she liked that the blame for a great deal of male assurance could be laid at the door of just such female enticement as poor little untutored Osceola was now parting with. She saw that Osceola would have felt splendidly honored at having *her* tresses fingered.

Laurie sighed deeply for her sex and wished that one set would not undermine the foundation upon which another set rested. As for men, the poor brutes, perhaps in their relations with women they were very much what they were permitted to be! For herself, she merely held the chicken and listened.

"How too's y'r ma?" Cal frowned deeply, not at any definite remembrance of Mrs. Carter, but because he had reached that stage in surgery which called for the tying of a knot, and to tie a knot in any thread finer than whipcord overtaxes a turpentiner every time.

"She's the same, I allow, thank you." Osceola raised her lashes and swept him with a glance that was frankly admiring and rallying. "Cal, your fingers are all thumbs. Want help?" The two words were not only a question but an offer, and a palpitating offer, of her intimate coöperation. To meet a man halfway was evidently tact, and to meet him more than halfway a virtue.

"Tie it yourself," ordered Cal, gladly relinquishing the intimacy and the knot together.

Osceola flushingly accepted the vacated place and undertook the assigned task, bungling it tremulously un-

der the happy honors of occupying a spot of ground so lately his.

Laurie drew another deep sigh.

"You haven't been to we-all's house for some time, Cal." The knot was tied.

"No," he answered with a great deal of decision.

The unmistakable inference was that any undue expectation on her part would keep him off the longer. Osceola caught her breath like one doused with cold water, but her affection accepted the rebuff as the body accepts cold water—tonically. Her big brown eyes promptly dismissed archness and grew gently meek. Had she been a wife she probably would have gone home and fried him an apology in the shape of a plateful of doughnuts.

He drew a jackknife and opened a blade ground to a sharpness calculated to cut iron, testing it with his thumb preparatory to trimming the threads at the end of the knot.

Upon seeing his thumb run over the murderous edge, Laurie succumbed to one of the feminine weaknesses and went inconsequentially limp and pale.

"Do be careful!" she begged. "You might get cut!" She easily could have added, "And I would not see a *dog* do that!" But of course she did not.

Before referring to the remark, Cal Tandy perfected the splint, returned the knife to his pocket, the chick to its box. Then straightening himself to his full six feet one in the air, he smiled down at her rather triumphantly.

"Sounds 's if you'd take consid'rable coaxing, Laurie McAllister, afore you'd plug a 'miscreant' *here*." He tossed his one unruly lock of black hair back into place, and touched his temple. Or plunk him with a bullet

here." He laid his clenched fist over his dynamo engine of a heart. "So I calc'late he needn't be any too all-fired feared o' yore li'l ole gun."

"Is there a chance for this chicken to recover?" she asked, as if he had been speaking of that instead of the gun—of which he had not been "any too all-fired feared" in the first place.

He accorded her a look of appreciation for her fine effrontery, and then replied, "Yes, if you keep from presenting it with any of woman's pity and jes' nachelly leave it be."

"Now I'll have to bid you good day," she remarked affably. "Osceola and I have gone into the yam business. I am so glad to have her company. I couldn't get on without it any more than I could without her help. Come, Osceola."

Comforting herself with the theory—a true one—that she would be fairly free from his raids now that he knew his little cracker sweetheart was scheduled to be in on the scenes, she and her partner sauntered down to the field of industry while the Georgian lounged gracefully off in the opposite direction, losing himself in the now dimming forest, whose shadowy avenues seemed to open their arms to him as to a kindred wild thing and then close them about him in a dark embrace that sheltered and protectingly hid.

Down among the tendrils and runners of the sweet-potato vines, although "Locksley Hall" lilted sweetly along to *Cousin Amy* and although the pile of tubers encouragingly grew, the sylvan work lacked much of its morning artlessness, for just as there are some people who improve the landscape, there are some who revolutionize it, and the influence of Calhoun Tandy lingered more or less damagingly. Laurie was con-

scious that the sun, though bright, was now too fiercely hot; that the lake in addition to its sparkling freshness owned a power that was restless and destructive; that yonder was an innocent puffball of a chick with a broken leg; and that closer at hand was a brown-eyed little maid who seemed intent upon hurrying herself uninvited down a lane leading only to a closed gate.

CHAPTER X

THE darling girl has her nose forever in that God-blessed book, my dear Charles," pointed out Andrew McAllister, mentioning the volume in tones of anything but benediction, notwithstanding.

It was late afternoon, hot of course, and the three of them were on Laurie's broad veranda which made up in coolness what it lacked in style, a breeze sweeping over it from the lake all day long and, better still, all night long. With his silvery papal head propped in a pale, lean hand, The McAllister still sat at the little chess table, staring fascinatedly at the black bishop that had just mated him; Roycroft, looking particularly young, handsome and *un*papal by contrast, stood opposite, ready to go; Laurie, not far distant, sat on the porch railing, hugging a post for support, and frowning fiercely into the pages of "Citrus Culture in Florida."

"Only my nose?" she asked, not lifting her eyes. "It's a wonder my heart, hands and two feet aren't in it too! Talk about wanting the moon—! why orange trees want the whole solar system, and what's more they manage to get it or *you* go under. This last half hour I've found out that if you don't spray for white fly by the tenth of the month, your cake is dough; if you don't mulch for cut-worm by the eleventh, your goose is cooked; if you don't powwow for wozzle bug by the

twelfth, your middle name is Mud; and so on through the remainder of the three hundred and sixty-five days."

"Wozzle bug!" hissed The McAllister, quite whizzing it out through circular lips, and boring into Roycroft with a gimlet glance. "What *is a wozzle bug?*"

"Only Miss Laurie knows," responded Roycroft, going over to her.

"And she won't tell," she said, not closing the book but relieving herself of it by placing it over the sleeping Little Eva like a tent.

"That book contains a great deal that is valuable, Miss Laurie," said Roycroft gravely, orange culture being his week-day religion.

"It does; especially now," she answered, watching it move rather restlessly on the porch floor.

"I perceive that you are in the mood to talk cat," he observed, lifting his chin suddenly as though from the point of a collar that was hot—a sign of disapproval.

"Only kitten," she corrected beamingly. "My intellect isn't up to cat yet, the way yours is."

"Tch!" erupted from The McAllister severely. "My very dear girl!"

Roycroft's face had remained calmly stony.

"Nice, light, sprightly pair," she commented, looking from one to the other of them. "I am sat upon because all I wanted was a little talk that wasn't about melanose or mealy bug."

"I hope you have not noticed indications of mealy bug in your grove," said Roycroft anxiously, ready for conversation again.

"Not yet; but it will come," she said cheerfully.

"Upon what do you base such a prediction?" he asked, scientifically nervous.

"Upon the knowledge that everything that shouldn't comes to me in time," she explained, reinforcing that explanation by singing pathetically, "'When a thing is bad, Pass it along, right along-along-along, To—dear—old—Dad!'"

"Why, you can sing, Miss Laurie," noticed Charles Roycroft, evidencing surprise.

"'Ay, and more too,'" she quoted darkly. "I play the piano." She was not exactly averse to letting him know she owned one or two female attributes.

"Annie Laurie sings like a meadow lark, Charles, my dear boy," announced her grandfather proudly.

"Only comic little Scotch wails," she interposed quickly, seeing that she was going to be asked to perform.

"*You said*——?" asked The McAllister tapping the bishop several times on the head, in a linguistic frenzy.

"Only quaint and historic ballads of Scotland, Grandpa."

Appeased, he left off hitting the bishop, and asked courteously,

"Will you not favor us with 'What's 'a the Steer, Kimmer?', my darling Annie Laurie?"

"Certainly, Grandpa," she answered, suddenly tender, deeply touched by the old-fashioned reverence he showed her. Then, recovering, "Get ready, gentlemen, it's coming."

First she unconsciously stooped and picked up the kitten from under its library tent, holding its limp and flattened body against her cheek as if it were a tuning fork and she could not warble without it; then, aware of Roycroft's steady gaze, murmured, "I think I'll sing to the orange trees; every little thing helps them," and turned her face away from her audience,

looking absently into the grove up whose dim avenues sandal-footed gray evening was slowly approaching.

Andrew leaned back in his chair and got his enormously long, extraordinarily thin forefinger all ready to beat time through the dusk.

Roycroft, standing, folded his arms across his chest, his searching glance being obliged to content itself with Little Eva's vacuous, blear-eyed countenance.

And with flute-like clearness, the quick song came, filling the air with its clear, almost defiant melody, as rapid and inspiring as the lilt of the bagpipes—

"What's 'a the steer, Kimmer, what's 'a the steer?
Jamie is landed and soon will be here.
Oh lace your boddice blue, lassie, lace your boddice blue,
Put on your Sunday cla'es and trim your cap anew.
For . . . I'm right glad o' heart, Kimmer, right glad o' heart;
I ha'e a bonnie breast-knot and for his sake I'll wea't!"

Feeling slightly foolish at the end, as all people do who have to sing without accompaniment, Laurie growled fiercely, still into the grove.

"Hurry up! Say something appropriate, gentlemen!"

"By Jove, I never heard a robin sing any more cheerily, don't you know!" ejaculated the young Englishman, smilingly pleased.

"And now favor us with 'Charlie is my darling,' my dearest of little girls."

"Oh, grandpa, it is so sad," she objected, suddenly sober. "And there is too much sadness already loose in the world." As she gazed into the depth of the grove, rubbing Little Eva medicinally up and down against her cheek, the future seemed to sketch all sorts of horrors—Little Eva maybe chewed by Jax; the yams un-

paid for; the mortgage foreclosing; the crop freezing; Selig walking off with the ebony mirror, among other things; and Roycroft writing a love letter to England.

"But it is particularly suited to the charming pathos of your voice, Annie Laurie."

"All right," she said miserably, using a form of assent that never failed to curl the old gentleman's lips into puckers of dislike.

But the song soon turned the pucker into something suspiciously like a tremble. For she sang it most appealingly and sweetly. And surely never was there a melody more sad and haunting than that slow minor chant! Into it is packed all the despair and heartache of the lost Stuart cause, with words that are pathetically commonplace and simple.

> Charlie is my darling, my darling, my darling!
> Charlie is my darling, that bonnie cavalier!

Finished, it still throbbed on the air, a poignantly plaintive memory, seeming to stir even the tendrils of the drooping porch vines into restless quivers of melancholy and regret. As for The McAllister's metronomic finger, that was petrified into motionlessness.

Roycroft broke the ensuing silence, saying in a voice that was less resonant and certain than usual,

"That was—well, thank you. Good evening." With this, he raised his hat and abruptly turned on his heel, striding off the porch and trooping stolidly forward to the gate where his horse was tied, giving Andrew absolutely no opportunity in which to ask his regular pleasantry—"Charles, am I to understand that you rowed over, or rode over?"

Laurie had come to the point where she waited for this pleasantry with a wince, wanting it out and over

with, like a decayed tooth. But Roycroft never failed to give it his agreeable, spontaneous laugh—the laugh of a joyous young fellow nearly knocked over by the newness of an unexpected piece of wit. No wonder the keeper of the joke now gazed after his retreating form with glowering astonishment.

"God forever bless my soul, what ails the lad?"

Pivoting around her post, Laurie also gazed amazedly at the vanishing guest.

"What made him go off as if he had a flea in his ear?" she exclaimed.

"Pardon me if my hearing is poor, but repeat if you please the expression you applied to our young friend's celerity!" commanded Andrew, awfully.

"Celerity! That's the word I wanted," she soothed. "Thank you, Grandpa, thank you!"

"Tch!"

While he busied his outraged self putting the chessmen back into their box where they had to lie just so or not at all, blacks on one side, whites on the other, all carefully head to tail like imported sardines, Laurie, mechanically kissing the kitten from time to time, still stared dreamily after the vanishing visitor who by now had nearly reached the road-fence, setting the bay to curvetting and whinnying. Then she noticed that visitor halt suddenly in front of a young orange tree as if struck forcibly and unpleasantly by some phenomenon that it presented.

"Wozzle bug?" she called out to him, satirically.

But he was too far off or too preoccupied to hear, being now busy scrutinizing a leaf through a magnifying glass. His pockets were seldom guiltless of soil-testers, distilled water, anther-nippers, litmus paper and such things. But his next performance was a little

out of the ordinary; he picked a leaf, put it into his handkerchief, knotted the handkerchief into a hammock, and rode off with it swinging carefully from his wrist.

"We'll hear about it tomorrow," she told the kitten.

However, tomorrow came and went, bringing its usual duties but no Roycroft. Still another morrow wore away without him, but the yams were so entertaining that Laurie forgot about the leaf until forcibly reminded by a new circumstance. This occurred on a hot forenoon when she had temporarily left Osceola to work alone in the sea-green furrows and had gone to the house to watch for the mailman. In the country, one has a sort of an idea that unless one watches for the mailman sharply, he won't bring a letter. If he thus goes by, the whole day is ruined.

Seated in a willow rocking chair (but unable to rock for the reason that Little Eva, like all others of her kind, never saw such a chair begin to move without immediately lying down under the rockers) Laurie looked for Balaam, thinking at the same time that she would not mind seeing a bay horse, either. In regard to seeing a horseman, she presently had her wish. The man was a rough-looking stranger, due to ride right past, but instead he drew rein and stared, apparently spellbound, at the same little orange tree. After staring, he dropped from his horse, vaulted the fence, appropriated a branch, and rode away with it, his face wearing a more or less dismayed expression.

"Well, I never!" ejaculated the girl. Then she got up and drawled in deep imitation of the absentee, "Bah Jove, I fancy I will take a look at that tree myself, don't you know!"

So saying, she wandered down to it and gave it an

examination, unable to discover much amiss with it, except that it was covered, stem, leaf and fruit, with small brown blotches that certainly had not been visible a few days before. A peculiarity of the spots was that they deepened in color towards the center.

"Sickening for measles, baby?" she asked the tree, kindly. Still thinking it over, "I wonder why his British nibs doesn't come and tell me about it?" Finally, "I'll go interview Peter."

For that faithful laborer had been intermittently in sight all morning, at work across the road in his young master's outlying fields, bobbing up and down in attendance on row after row of budded stock—little wisps of trees about the size of lead pencils and just about as leafless.

Laurie walked over to him, making the short trip with exceeding difficulty, for it entailed the climbing of two wire fences and a scrambling plunge through a cover crop of beggarweed and cowpeas.

"At home, Peter?" she asked affably, standing over him while he knelt in the sand, scooping it up in cone-like mounds around each tiny tree—this to protect the bud from possible frost later on.

"Why, no, Miss Laurie, I's here wukkin in dis field," he answered, pained at her lack of sight, and rising stiffly to stand before her, his one hand rubbing the small of his back, the other rubbing his heart.

"Not as young as you were, Peter?"

" 'Deed no, Miss Laurie. Miss Laurie, yo' aint happen to have a hawg's tooth about yo', has yo'?"

"Hog's tooth? Well, no, Peter. How careless of me! I'm generally dripping with hog's teeth, but am all out of them this morning. What do you want one for?"

"Dey's powerful curative for floodin' of the heart, Miss Laurie, ef yo' tie 'em togedder with a one-cent piece and hang 'em around de neck."

"I can give you the penny, Peter."

"But it has to be a injun penny, not a Lincum, Miss Laurie."

"I probably have a injun among my Lincums, Peter, and if so I'll sort it out and keep it for you."

"Thank yo', Miss Laurie."

"Yurelkum, Peter. Maybe Mr. Roycroft has a hog's tooth in his set and will give it to you."

"How can he when he don' live here no more?"

"Don't live here?" she echoed.

"Din yo' know Mr. Rake-off he's gone away?" asked Peter, sadly.

"No, I didn't, Peter," she answered in a low tone. "But aren't you mistaken? He never would leave without saying good-by."

"Did say it," cried Peter. "He even shuk my hand, ole black hand, an' tell me, 'Look atter ev'yt'ing *good*, Peter, while I's away to college.' "

"College? Mr. Roycroft's too old for college!"

"Mr. Charles Colin Rake-off ent too old for anyt'ing he set his mind on," announced Peter profoundly. "When yo' study him, yo' find dat out." After thinking over her criticism and liking it less and less, he said reprovingly, "Too old? Why, he ain't even begun to be too young yet."

"Did he send . . . send Grandpa any word, Peter?"

"If so, I ain't hear it, Miss Laurie."

"Do you know what college, Peter?"

"Yes, he done specify it to me, but I forget."

Afraid of committing that indefensible act known pictorially as "pumping," and thinking that the mail

would doubtless bring some explanation, she observed concludingly, "Well, let's hope he gets on, wherever he is."

"Oh, he'll git on good," said Peter, in a singsongy, airy way that hinted at Roycroft's perfect ability to do it of himself without anybody's hoping.

In the midst of the sun's glare, the world to Laurie went suddenly black, and she felt as frightened as one stricken with illness, yet who has to live on and fight—alone.

"Isn't it hot, Peter," she asked, suffocated. "Isn't it hot?"

"Hot? Don' mek me laugh, Miss Laurie," begged Peter, chuckling freely. "It starts my heart to floodin'. Hot? If yo' call dis hot, yo' won' hev no name lef' for *July*."

He cautiously and angularly lowered himself to his knees, and began sloping the warm sand up around another row of wisps, doing it with the lack of haste that is absolutely necessary in the semitropics. In Florida if you hurry unduly, you merely beat your neighbors to the cemetery.

She went back to her own domains, noticing that the beggarweed clogged her feet worse than it had done before, and that the barbs in the wire fence hooked her with extra viciousness, always choosing a piece of her apparel that was hardest for her to reach. Everything in nature seemed to be taking a little vicious dig at her—the way boys liven up a substitute when their regular teacher is away. Was Peter right? *Had* his young master disappeared off the face of the earth without a word of farewell? It seemed anything but likely. Yet Peter was not of the romancing class of negroes.

With her dismay, the girl mixed a great deal of self-disgust, flagellating herself for letting a man's existence or nonexistence interfere with her plan of life. Since Roycroft had not entered into her calculations *before* she undertook the grove, how could he possibly complicate matters by going away? The logical answer to this was,—he could not.

Therefore, after receiving a budget of mail at her gate, she proceeded with it to the house with a cheerfulness which, outwardly, left nothing to be desired. She opened her grandfather's papers and letters for him—discovering without particular difficulty that none of the correspondence was from any C. C. R.—then she skimmed through her own mail, making the same discovery with the same ease. It certainly was queer.

"Peter says that Mr. Roycroft has gone away, Grandpa," she remarked, later, while gathering and twisting into an unblowable heap all the circulars of the day. If you buy a grove, every fertilizer company from Los Angeles to Baffin's Bay is immediately on your track. In the present heap, however, there was one printed letter having nothing to do with potash. Had Laurie read it instead of destroying it, she would at least have been prepared for something that was soon to happen. But her mind was filled with other matters. "Peter says he has gone to college."

"Is it possible?" murmured The McAllister politely, avidly turning the newspaper inside out to get at the editorials.

Very old people are difficult to predicate. Sometimes they listen placidly to details of the death of their best friend; sometimes they die of shock if their breakfast toast is done too brown. Perhaps they dwell too close to the Fairer Land to feel really parted from those

who go before. At any rate, The McAllister was evidently not going to fret over his neighbor's absence, so long as good reading matter held out.

Forced into an imitation of the prevailing resignation, Laurie took up each day's business without further word. But at night, when the moon rose and shone upon the lake, making a bridge of light from shore to shore, her lonely fancy crossed over and wandered questingly and questioningly through the tenantless grove.

And now came the evening when she had most decided cause to feel friendless. Osceola had gone home; early supper was over; Andrew, bolt upright in a porch chair, loftily rejecting every suggestion of a nap, was nevertheless snatching one whenever he could, waking up at intervals to declare serenely, "I am listening to you, my darling," even though nothing had been said. Laurie was sitting Turkish fashion on the flooring of the veranda trying to teach the idiot kitten to feed itself from a saucer, a process that was never successful till the mewing little beast chanced to fall face downward into the milk, where it would snuffle and choke for a few minutes to its great advantage.

"Seems queer to think that I could sit here for a hundred years with my eyes on the highroad and never see a human soul," mused Laurie, young enough to find the situation a uniquely romantic one.

And even as she spoke, a dozen or more men on horseback rode slowly into view. She gazed at the unusual, not to say thrilling, sight with the awed fascination of a child whose wildest imaginations have suddenly been turned into actual fact by a fairy godmother—maybe a spiteful one.

"Perhaps it's a rehearsal for a moving picture," she

went on to herself. "For that front man with the pistol belt and badge is a sheriff, and we don't see sheriffs in real life."

Yet even while she was giving this peaceful explanation to herself, she knew it to be false; the men were not of the volatile actor type; they were stolid and sodden with the grim actualities of life; one of them was the uncouth individual who had snapped a branch from her orange tree the day before. All of them drew rein at her gate, dismounted, tied their horses and entered.

" 'And dare'st thou then
To beard the lion in his den,
The Douglas in his hall?' "

she murmured, finding herself grown suddenly angry. About these men there was an air of owning the earth that she did not like, and she made up her mind they should not come nearer the house without an invitation. So she got up and walked down the avenue of magnolias to meet them. They waited her approach, though with manifest lack of ease.

"This is McAllister's grove, isn't it, lady?" asked the man with the badge. He gave his cap a tug of courteous intention. "I'm Ed O'Connell, miss." The "miss" was uttered with more gentleness than the "lady." Laurie's slim and frightened prettiness had had an effect upon him.

"Oh, then you *are* a sheriff," she exclaimed, recognizing the name. "You don't want to see *me*, do you? I don't remember having murdered anybody!"

Her pleasantry plunged him into deeper gloom.

"I'm not really the feller that's on this job, miss," he grunted, slouching back a step or two. "It's Mike L'Amoreaux, here."

She eyed Mike L'Amoreaux without particular affection.

"This is your second appearance on my premises, isn't it?" she asked, glancing illustratingly from him to the orange tree.

"I want to talk to the owner of the grove," said L'Amoreaux curtly.

"You are doing it."

"Then you are—"

"Miss McAllister."

After frowningly sizing her up, L'Amoreaux muttered uneasily,

"Where's the man of this place? My deal's with him, I reckon."

"There he is," said she, pointing through the magnolias to the porch where sat her frail grandfather, his thin face wearing the ghastly ashen hue of the old who slumber. "And you'll oblige me by not disturbing him."

"Gee," said Mike L'Amoreaux restlessly. "Him?"

"Miss McAllister," broke in O'Connell, "we are not on a pleasant errand."

"I guessed it from your faces," she faltered. "But there can't really be anything the matter."

"The worst thing that could happen to the county, Miss McAllister."

"But what have I to do with it?"

"You're the first to suffer," he answered soberly. "But I'm scared you won't be the last."

"Do speak out. I haven't an idea of what you mean."

"I hadn't either—when it happened to me," said a third man, laughing in a maniacal, dreary way. "But I soon found out!"

"When it happened to you?" she echoed. "And *what* happened to you?"

The man merely doubled one of his hands into a fist and beat it into the other hand.

"He's Gerald Shafer," explained the sheriff, as if the name elucidated everything. "You know him? You've heard of him?"

"No," she said, "I haven't."

"Never heard of the Shafer grove? The biggest on the west coast?"

"Never."

"Haven't you been getting the printed reports of the Consolidated Shipping League?"

"Regularly," she said, giving the word a disparaging rising inflection, remembering the daily clutter in her mail.

"Then you can't have been putting them to any good use."

"I certainly have, Mr. O'Connell; I've lit the kitchen fire with them!"

Usually her gay impudence won a smile even from the victim of it. But the gravity on these faces remained unlifted.

The men who were not taking active part in the conversation were looking around them with the expression of humane butchers who disliked the thought of the coming kill.

"The point's this," said burly Mike L'Amoreaux, shouldering O'Connell out of the talk, doubtless considering him too circuitous of speech. "Two weeks ago that there Shafer was a rich man with thousands of boxes of fruit as good as sold. Today his grove is cut down, his land is ashes and he ain't worth a cent, not a red cent, 'cep' what he earns from the state on jobs like this."

Gerald Shafer again brutally pounded his own hand,

and, in the dead tone of a somnambulist, swore an unrepeatable oath.

Laurie shivered, but still had to feel sorry for the man; it was not hard for her to understand how loss of trees and fruit might easily spell utter ruin.

"Oh, the poor, poor fellow!" she said swiftly. "What did it?"

"Canker," said L'Amoreaux with sledge-hammer brevity.

"Oh!" She had to fight to speak composedly. For now the full story was told. Great as was her general ignorance in regard to citrus diseases, she could not help but know of this, the worst. The whole world had been talking of it, appalled by its virulence. Brought into this country from Asia, infected stock had gone from nursery to nursery before the trouble was discovered. Then one grove after another succumbed to the germ, dying—one might say—in a night. For a time the scourge was confined to certain lowlands on the Gulf; and growers were very quiet about it, hoping to check it by their own individual efforts. But it got away from them, and insidiously spread. Alarmed, the counties fought it—but were beaten. Then the state took hold. Paid experts went from point to point, appropriating all infected stock and burning it. Nothing less drastic was of the least avail. The disease was recognized as incurable; in fact, its name at first was cancer. Knowing that it had been successfully kept out of her own vicinity—practically out of Florida, except for sporadic instances—Laurie had refused to vex herself about it, having enough else. But now she could not doubt but that it had come. She looked affrightedly at one man after another; then she looked at the little tree that had shown the queer spots. "You

have found citrus canker in my grove?" she asked, bracing herself for the answer by drawing a deep breath.

"That's exactly the size of it," said L'Amoreaux, pointing to the guilty tree, adding blusteringly, "Go look at it yourself."

"I have already done so," she answered, locking her small hands to keep them from shaking. "I know there is something the matter with it. If it be canker, you have my permission to cut it down and burn it. I know that must be done."

To her surprise, the men's glances seemed to flinch from meeting hers. It was as though they were trying to veil something.

"Is there anything else, gentlemen?" she asked timidly. "If so, tell me."

"You pruned these trees, didn't you?" jerked out Shafer, attackingly. "I see the trash on the ground. I know you did. Well, with that pruning knife, or shears, you inoculated every tree in your grove. And if you haven't the birds have done it for you. Every bird that ever lit on this tree has carried the disease to every other tree it's touched. Your own skirts, Miss McAllister, have spread it like paint. The thing's worse than smallpox. Don't *I* know? God!"

"Why, you don't mean——" She could get no further. Her tongue refused to say it.

Mike L'Amoreaux said it for her.

"We must burn every tree in the grove."

"Well, you simply shan't do it," she announced calmly. "I forbid you."

"Miss McAllister," said O'Connell, deeply. "I'm bound to tell you we're not here to get anybody's permission, but jes' to go ahead and do what we have to

do. This isn't any little private circus of Mike's, believe me. He isn't even a grower. He's just an arm of the law, like I be. We don't have to tell you we are sorry for you; you can see that. But we want you to see even further. We want you to see that we've no course left but to do what we's *sent* to do."

"But you can't, you can't," she raved. "Be human. There's nothing the matter with the rest of those trees. Just look at them."

"Gerald Shafer told you right, Miss McAllister. For all their clean appearance, the whole kit and boiling of them is on the go, and in ten days will be fuller of rotten mush than a pest house, meaning a wipeout for every other grove in the county. I know this is hard for you, miss, but you're up against something you can't dodge, so you might as well grit your teeth and meet it head on. That's what Shafer did. Not only that, but he helped us make hisself a bankrupt. Then, to keep bread and butter in the mouths of his children, he hired out at a dollar seventy-five a day to help the state. That's how he stood it—cooler than cucumbers. Not but what he's been going to pieces on a dead gallop ever since."

At this, the jerking, glaring Shafer—after an opening obbligato of awful expletives—told him that he was every sort of a lurid fool, and that he, Shafer, was as sane and well as the forever blazing hereafter. There was a classicism about his profanity, and an erudition about his diction, that proved him to be a man of considerable education.

"Then the state will reimburse me?" asked Laurie, her tragic eyes on O'Connell, deaf even to Shafer's sulphurous trimmings.

"For what?" ripped out L'Amoreaux. He knew how

to make every word a bludgeon. "The state isn't destroying anything of value, but doing your work. You ought to pay the state."

"Aw, shut off the hot air, Mike!" growled O'Connell. Then he took from the capacious side pockets of his riding coat several specimens of cankerous leaves and bark, each carefully inclosed between two plates of glass, bound round like passepartout frames. He handed them to the girl. "You take them to that tree and compare them," he advised, respectfully. "Convince yourself."

She did as she was told. While she compared the specimens with the spots on the afflicted tree, losing heart after each identification, the men closed in around her like doctors at a clinical operation. She handed the slides back to O'Connell without a word.

"As you see, there is nothing else to be said," he observed, repocketing his property. This conclusion set a stir of activity among the men. The butchers had received their orders.

"But there *is* something else to say," cried Laurie imploringly. "Have you any idea of what this will mean to me, to us? This grove is all we have in the world. Look at him. Look!" She pointed up the avenue of magnolias to the house. Andrew McAllister had awakened and was standing up, staring blankly and unseeingly towards the road, unable to distinguish objects at such a distance; then he turned and tottered shakingly into the house, fancying himself unseen as well as unseeing, and consequently taking no pains to pretend to be sprightly and vigorous. He typified the last lingering shadow of life, as the twilight hour told of the close of day. "What will happen to *him* when you take our support from us? Can he, or I, hire

out as destroyers at a dollar seventy-five? Tell me?"

"Why do you speak 's if *we* were robbing you, lady?" asked the sheriff, sternly. "Can't you see that you was robbed before we got here?"

A roughly sympathetic man in the crowd muttered,

"Seen jobs I've admired more, though, Ed, than jumpin' with both my big feet on a nice girl."

"We've chinned to a finish," settled L'Amoreaux, tersely. "It's time for business now."

"God, yes!" hissed Shafer, staring at the nearest tree. "The sooner we start, the sooner we're through."

It was the final word.

"I do call you destroyers, I do call you robbers," cried Laurie, addressing the bunch impartially. "I call you marauders and murderers and beasts. If you weren't, you'd give these trees a chance. They don't show a sign of disease yet, and they mayn't develop it. I declare, if I had sixteen shots in my revolver instead of six, I'd shoot a lump of caution into every one of you. Having heard what I think of you, you may go ahead, you bloodhounds."

A growling mutter issued from every throat in excusable protest against her desperate classification. When the growl died away, a new note arose on the still air, one so peacefully at variance with the quarrelsome situation as to sound almost uncanny and supernatural by contrast. This was the approaching whistle of "Annie Laurie." It floated pleasantly downward from a slight height, and was given with leisurely, melodic correctness.

Everybody turned and stared at the road. The whistler was a young man on horseback, who let his steed amble gracefully at will, and who evidently knew not of a care in the world that should cause him to hurry.

The beautiful bay horse stopped of itself at the McAllister gate.

"Good evening, Miss McAllister," said the khaki-clad rider, baring his brown head deferently.

"Mr. Roycroft——" She could get no further.

He looked at her companions synthetically and analytically.

"Doubtless I am a conceited ass, don't you know, Miss McAllister, but I always hoped you would invite me to your first reception."

"Mr. Roycroft! Oh, Mr. Roycroft!" Her voice was very low but it trembled.

He instantly leaped from his horse, leaving it to be its own proud master, and came in at the gate, invited or uninvited, shouldering his way unceremoniously through the visitors to stand at the girl's side.

The sheriff nodded a greeting to him, saying,

"I'm rather glad to see you here, Mr. Roycroft."

"Only 'rather,' O'Connell? Can't bid it any higher?"

"Mr. Roycroft," said Laurie, glad to find that the tremble had miraculously gone from her voice, "these men say they must burn my grove."

As the result of this one sentence, Roycroft's glance traveled at once to the small orange tree.

"So you'd noticed it, eh?" questioned O'Connell.

Roycroft seldom indulged in talk for talk's sake. In a vast and decidedly irritating silence, he took several letters from a breast pocket and hunted through them unhastily. Finding the special paper, he put away the others, then opened the needed one with calm deliberation.

"This is a report given by the Agricultural College at Gainsville," he announced. "I have just returned from a trip to that place, where I submitted leaves,

bark, and fruit of the suspected tree. Permit me to read you the gist of this communication:

"After careful analyses, and repeated microscopic tests, of the various exhibits, we have no hesitation in giving it as our opinion that the tree from which they were taken, though manifesting many of the discolorations and diseased spots familiar in cases of citrus canker, is not suffering from that disease, but from internal derangement of the functional processes carried on within the tree itself. This, of course, satisfactorily disposes of the idea that the trouble might be contagious. Before prescribing curative measures, we suggest that you examine the soil about the roots. The entire disturbance may be due to some enzyme present at that point."

A stir of universal relief went round.

"I'll be jiggered if I'm not glad for Seminole County," said the sheriff in his deep boom. "I hated to think it was in for a licking."

"Seminole County can be—be jiggered, too," said Laurie, breathlessly. "At present I'm too glad for myself to think of anything else."

But Mike L'Amoreaux was rolling his heavy head like a bull. Perhaps he was only anxious to perform his whole duty to the state. At any rate, he stepped up close to Roycroft, and bellowed belligerently,

"That *listens* good, young feller, but how do we know that the 'exhibits' mentioned in the report were from this tree at all? I've only your word for it. What *proof* can you give me?"

"This," answered Roycroft, handing it to him in the form of a terrific impact under the chin, with clenched fist.

Heavy as Mike L'Amoreaux was, he staggered over backwards and would have fallen had he not landed

in more or less of a heap on his interested companion, who clutched and constrained him while supporting. The ensuing commotion was what Charles Roycroft himself would have termed "a Donnybrook." Surging like a tidal wave, the crowd of men broke into a general conversation, over the noisy head of which came L'Amoreaux's yelps of, "Leave go of me! I'll show him who he's hitting!"

In the flash of pause, Roycroft ripped off his coat. Laurie found herself calmly and politely reaching out for this article, getting it, and holding it.

"Let him come on," begged Roycroft. "*All* of you come on," he quite implored. "The only stipulation I make is that you do not come more numerously than three at a time."

"Two!" called Laurie, as though prompting him in his lines.

She felt so sure of him that she was almost sorry when Gerald Shafer spoiled the fun, which he did by merely stepping up to Mike L'Amoreaux and tapping him authoritatively on the chest. L'Amoreaux stopped lunging and waited for him to speak. The tragedy through which Shafer had recently passed made him a sort of oracle.

"You got only what was coming to you," he ruled, fiercely. "What else did you expect, you damned tailless monkey, when you gave the lie to a gentleman? Think he was going to hand you a box of cigars for it?"

At this, the least interested of the spectators broke into a snicker of mirth. Laughter causes a terrific slump in heroics. Taking advantage of the slump, Ed O'Connell very sensibly petted and pushed his cohorts towards their horses.

"Come on. We've had an earful for one evening," he observed, truly.

"Aw, if you're all quitters, what's the use," yelled L'Amoreaux, while forcibly being retreated. "Have your own way about that tree, you slugging pup, but I make you a present of the consequences!"

"I am ready to share tonight's consequences with you any time you choose to call upon me," answered Roycroft, not having to yell. He had a voice that carried. "But if you are in the least interested about drawing your salary, I advise you to drop this affair completely. When it comes to a matter that 'listens good,' how do you think it will sound to the authorities to be told that their highest priced man had muffed a diagnosis?"

"We all make mistakes, Mr. Roycroft," said the pacific and well-balanced O'Connell, after mounting his force and mounting himself. "We can't be any too thankful to you, though, for getting here on time and putting us right."

They all set off at a gallop and disappeared in a cloak of dust. The aristocratic bay, which had pranced reservedly to the far side of the road, gazed after them with red-nostriled disdain.

The man and girl, finding themselves the sole owners of the silent dusk, looked at each other with the studious calm of two who have just met. Then Roycroft turned a horribly ashamed pink.

"My coat, if you please," he murmured. "Thank you. And pardon me."

He buttoned himself back to conventional composure, and felt anxiously at his precious brown silk four-in-hand. The remembrance of the act that had preceded his disrobing caused him visible anguish.

"I am an underbred cad," he went on firmly. "I should have remembered that a lady was present."

"Oh, I'm not that sort of a lady," she disclaimed eagerly. "I'm downright sorry you didn't wallop them. They needed it."

He showed pronounced symptoms of being unable to assimilate wallop.

"I think I am upset and discombobbled," she murmured, in low apology for it. Then, looking around her, faintly, "Is there any place to sit down?"

"Accept my arm," he said, offering it gracefully. "Let me take you to the house."

This practical propriety braced her like a cold shower.

"I'm all right now," she said, after a moment. She walked slowly along under the magnolias, Roycroft keeping beside her.

"I blame myself for not coming sooner," he said. "By so doing I might have saved you all this annoyance."

"Oh, and I've never thanked you!"

"There is no need," he observed stiffly. "The precautions I took were as much in my own interests, of course, as yours."

"That's so, of course," she admitted, feeling a little uncomfortable over having tried to usurp the whole excitement.

"Will you allow me to say that I very much admire your composure?" he asked earnestly.

"What's that? Oh, yes, I allow it," she replied, indifferently. If he had only exclaimed unceremoniously, "You're a good sport," she would have laughed gratefully and shaken hands with him. In her business life she had learned to like the ways of bluff and brotherly

men, and "language" generally sounded insincere to her.

"You are stronger than I thought you would be."

" 'My strength is as the strength of ten, because my heart is pure,' " she quoted, aggravatingly.

"I perceive that you are not especially interested in what I am saying, but I wish to assure you that grove life is not all a struggle. You may come to like it."

"I do already."

"You do?" he demanded with considerable eagerness.

" 'It's the dash dashedest pie I ever wrastled with, but I like it, oh, I like it.' "

He stood still.

"Am I intruding? Do you wish me to go?"

"Can't you hear a little poetry without getting black in the face?" she counterdemanded.

He considered this deeply, then virtually replied in the affirmative by continuing to walk at her side.

"I venture to instruct you out of my greater experience, Miss Laurie. May I tell you why I left England?"

"Yes, I guess you may do so safely; the sheriff's gone."

"By Jove, you make things easy for a chap, Miss Laurie!" he protested.

"Then go on," she said, affably. "Well, Mr. Bones, why did you leave England?"

Having by now reached one of the numerous short flights of steps leading to her wealth of veranda, she leaned against one railing, and he against the other.

"I grew tired of doing nothing," he said, evidently having a reason for wishing to acquaint her with details in regard to himself. "One of my brothers is in the army, the other in the navy. My mater, who's

awfully charming and all that, don't you know, wanted me to stay around with her and go to teas and play tennis, and all the rest of it; and she could not understand why I had to go. But I had."

"Was the tea poor?"

"The mater took far from kindly to the idea of my going into business over there; but did not so much mind India or Africa."

"Or America—while mentioning savage climes."

"Nor America. So I came on. I did not like New York—"

"Hush! it might hear you."

"It was too confoundedly rushy. Every man seemed bent on doing up the other man, don't you know. But I met a glorious old chap from California, who talked oranges. Well, that was the beginning. I came down here, and I have stayed. Hard work agrees with me. It fascinates me. Never again can I be content to idle. Then, too, the money piles up. That also is fascinating."

"I believe it," she groaned dismally. "But only from hearsay."

"You are more tired than you think, Miss Laurie. I wish you would go in and lie down."

"Oh, if you want to be rid of me . . . !" she exclaimed airily, running up the steps. "But I am not as easily shoved under as you seem to imagine. So you might as well leave off making pitying eyes at me. There. That's right. Oh, tonight's affair was a little fierce while it lasted maybe, but it's all life! With me, when a thing is over it is forgotten. Next!"

"Next, I must ask a favor of you," he said gently.

"Don't be afraid to ask a big one," she said, amazed by his unusualness. "I owe you much. What is it?"

"A private interview with your grandfather."

"Why I rather think that privilege would have been yours anyhow," she mentioned drily. "You informed me a few minutes ago that I was not wanted. I'll ask Grandpa to come out. Tell him about not liking New York. He'll love you to death for it."

CHAPTER XI

BY now the smiling year was nearly at November, though a northern calendar would have fought the fact as too preposterous, for, reviving from the fiery blasts of summer, all leaves were growing greener, and the suavity of the air passed description. The poinsettia plants were busily and very thriftily painting their surplus foliage a brilliant scarlet, manufacturing blossoms almost overnight, and blossoms so large that one of them would more than fill a soup plate.

Warned of their approaching season by one or two cool nights, the oranges were turning from green to gold, thus making themselves startlingly visible, seeming to hang fruit where none had been before. The groves were transformed into forests of trimmed Christmas trees.

This particular morning was at sunrise, but not the sunrise of a mountainous land where it comes with misty slowness, first peeping through a gorge, then hiding behind a hill and not appearing again till high enough to come filtering through a screen of boughs and branches, creating almost as many dark shadows as belong to the night which it drives away. No, in level Florida when the sun is up it is up, and leaps into the heavens with the joyous suddenness of a red balloon cut from a string. The nights are filled with enchantment enough; the morning is a fresh business deal, tremendously inspiring.

The two girls had just arrived at the yam patch, prepared to accomplish wonders, for the end was well in sight. They had been working it now for more than a fortnight, and most of its emerald carpet was rooted up and flung aside. But a few of the furrows were still roofed over with vines, and in one of these covered trenches Laurie was walking with hidden feet, shuffling happily as through autumn leaves. In another minute Gray's "Elegy" was due to descend upon her.

"Laurie, I wouldn't do that," counseled Osceola sharply. "It's far more foolhardy than brave."

"I'm only having a little fun before school," she announced. "Why the word 'brave'? Why the word 'foolhardy'?"

"Snakes," explained Osceola with a brevity that was very expressive.

Needing no further persuasion, Laurie stepped upon a ridge and picked the remainder of her steps.

"Here rests his head upon the lap of earth,"

she declaimed dramatically on reaching the end of the ridge.

She sat down on the ground and dug industriously into a hill.

"A youth to fortune and to fame unknown,"

supplemented Osceola, likewise sitting down and getting to work. She quoted with clinging appreciation of every precious word.

"Fair science—frowned not—on his humble birth,"

panted Laurie, tugging hard at a stubborn tuber that finally came from the sand with a hollow "plop!"

"And melancholy marked him for its own,"

ended Osceola, also producing a tuber, a kinked one which she greeted with a dreamy "Looks like a duck."

Presently they took another hill each, and another stanza of Gray's "Elegy." It dug a yam field even more successfully than "Locksley Hall." This last had all been learned a line to a yam, till certain shapes of sweet potatoes, whether cooked or otherwise, suggested nothing to Laurie but

"Oh, my Amy, mine no more!"

In fact a "dish of Amys" already had a reputable place in the McAllister menu vocabulary.

The yam patch with its two pretty laborers made a picture not unworthy the brush of a Millet, its levels stretching pensively into hazy distance, the glossy-leaved grove on one side, and on the other the lake shining like a mirror in the sun. Shown up splendidly by these surrounding greens and blues, stack upon stack of rose-colored tubers caught the eye and filled it artistically, despite the fact that the attraction was mere vulgar vegetable. Farther off, nearer the house, were stacks that equally testified to industry but failed to please the eye, nor as yet the imagination, for they were the sacked article for which no provision had been made in regard to carting.

A sweet potato that will walk of itself to a shipping dock has not yet been raised.

And now came Tallahassie and Lee, the former on a run, the latter with a sleepwalker's lethargy. Rac-

ing entertainedly between the little girl's bare heels was Jax; his black-and-white spots looked particularly artificial in a good light, making him resemble no known dog but the Noah's ark kind.

"I'm trainin' him to be my kerridge-pup!" yelled Tallahassie, romping happily into earshot. "Learnin' him to do what I tell him. Looker here—*charge!*"

Refusing to take this command as a canine quietus, but rather as instructions to a light brigade, Jax immediately raced headlong to the house to cheer up Little Eva. Having fallen in love with the idiot kitten at first sight his constant delight thereafter was to pay her attentions. Wherever she hid he would nose her out with fur-raising result. Blear-eyed but dignified she would try to glare him down, whereat he would lift a paw and bark the burlesque threat "Die!" At this she would invariably collapse over backward with hisses and spits. Then Jax would gallop industriously around the whole house in order to give Little Eva time to right herself in readiness for the next performance.

"He ain't *all* of him trained yet," admitted Tallahassie, gazing after him darkly. Then she turned to the more congenial occupation of regaling the two workers with an account of the sights she had seen *en route*. Tallahassie could extract more from a woods trail than many a one from an African hunt. "An' that there slick Englishman isn't far away, shootin' quail," she ended. "He calls 'em pa'tridge, but no matter what he calls 'em he gets 'em. His gun is the comical-ist ever, an' don' make no noise when it goes off. He acted real handsome to me, and showed me how it worked. He held it out to me so's I could read the name," she went on, flushing sensitively. "I was

'shamed to say I couldn't read, so I glued my eyes to the place a toler'ble time to throw him off the track. I hope I done it, for I'd like him to think *some* of me. He's mighty nice, an' his hair bags out wavy."

During this latter recital Laurie's eyes were sympathetically upon the victim of the "big lazies," for, robbed by it of all his boy heritage, able only to chew his nails and mope, he had not evinced the faintest interest in guns or quail, leaving all such manliness to his vivacious little sister. Lee was growing thinner of frame and paunchier of abdomen, and his unwholesome flesh was as pasty-hued as cold boiled macaroni. He finally shifted uneasily under the sympathetic gaze, evidently seeing need to escape.

"I raikon I go find out if how them trout is a-bitin'," he furtively remarked, as he slouched towards the dilapidated dock.

It still crawled out into the lake on its hundred rotten legs, with centipede twists in it—a useless but charmingly picturesque landscape effect. Upon it Lee would huddle for hours at a time, holding drowsily to a line and betraying real vexation when a "trout"—which was the generic name for anything with fins—hooked itself and had to be hauled in.

Tallahassie began piling yams in the wheel-barrow in order to trot them to the cleansing surf. The piling had to be performed more or less tenderly, for a Florida yam has a particularly sensitive temperament and goes into an unmarketable state of mushy melancholy if thoughtlessly thumped.

"You start up you' po'try, you two," ordered the little girl of the older ones. "I've took quite a shine to that there Gray Sellegy, an' I've learned myself the first reel-off. I'll tell it to you."

This she proceeded to do. Her idea of "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day" turned out to be:

"The coffee tells the smell of parting day,
The flowing her swines lowly o'er the lea:
The homeman plodward ploughs his weary way
And leaves the swirl to darkies and to me."

"Why, my goodness gracious," commented the astonished Laurie.

"What can you do with a dunce like that?" asked Osceola, reddening with annoyance.

"Teach her," answered Laurie promptly. She thereupon explained the verse, though without bringing conspicuous relief to the misquoter. For a truth Tallahassie looked rather robbed.

"It plum spiles the hull thing," she complained, in highly aggrieved tones. "Afore I could mos' taste that coffee bilin', an' see somebody's pap comin' home with a plough, an' hear the darkies singin'. It was a right smart of a pretty pickcher—even to the razorback hawgs a-rootin'."

"As I said before, what can you do with a dunce like that?" asked Osceola, the angry humiliation deepening in her brown eyes. She flashed a somber glance from Tallahassie to the distant hump that was Lee—an obvious disowning of both.

"And as I said before, teach her," insisted Laurie.

"Osceoly hain't got time for nothin' excep' to pretty-up an' watch for Cal Tandy," grinned Tallahassie, catching up the wheelbarrow handles with a capable jerk. "*I* see him once in whiles, an' he tells me she'd be doin' better to darn my stockin's 'stead of lettin' me git sandspurs in my toes, goin' bare-laigged." She wheeled the load on its way, calling back over her

bony little shoulder, "Look a'yonder who's comin'."

It was Roycroft's Peter, who, emerging from the woods with some quail in his hands, solemnly stalked the whole distance to the yam diggers before opening his mouth. He had copied this mannerism from his young employer and was burstingly proud of it.

"Miss Laurie," he then said, humbly uncapping himself, "Mr. Rake-off sends these hyar buds to yo' granpaw wid his expects—or suspects." This not sounding right either, Peter rubbed his wool with the cap, saying desperately, "*Somethin'* wid specks to it."

"Please take them to the house, Peter, and tell Mr. Roycroft that we certainly thank him."

"We-all sutt'nly don' need no thanks," disclaimed Peter grandly.

He took the birds to the house, disappeared inside to do something properly domestic with them, then came out and wandered off by way of the magnolia avenue and the front gate.

Taking note of this evident familiarity, Osceola had something to think about that temporarily sidetracked the poet's epitaph. She and her field partner worked several hills in utter silence.

"Mr. Roycroft must be a nice neighbor," she then ventured, with a hopeful note in her voice.

"Very," answered Laurie frankly. "I don't know what we should do without him, grandpa especially. He plays chess with grandpa by the hour."

This cheerful unsentimentality was evidently not what Osceola had waited for, and "chess with grandpa by the hour" was an assurance that evidently took away more comfort than it brought, for chess is a two-handed game leaving a third person dangerously free.

"Has Cal been around again?" she finally asked.

Her pretty, worried face went scarlet. She bent it low over her task, and worked at a yam of hippopotamus proportions, trying to coax it unharmed to upper air, but, shorn of skill, she tugged it nervously and it broke with a groan.

"Yes," answered Laurie tersely.

After the admission she pressed her lips together and thought over the visits with a vexation that was more general than specific, for the rough young Georgian had confined them ostensibly to surveying the progress of the chick in splints.

Osceola looked up with a world of hurt and fear in her telltale eyes. Beneath the man's hat that she wore her little face had turned from scarlet to pale, and recorded legibly the jealous suffering that a more ingenuous nature would have hidden to the end.

Recognizing the situation to be one of those where tact would be mistaken for subterfuge, Laurie throttled her own sensibilities and asked point-blank, "Little friend, are you engaged to this—this Calhoun Tandy?" She had nearly said "this uncouth boor."

Osceola turned away her head in sweet confusion. Hardly anything was visible but the crown of the hat, a pink ear, and a brown curl. She looked pleadingly childish, sitting low in the furrow of earth.

"I—I think so," she murmured.

"Think so!" The northern girl was more vexed by this indefiniteness than amused by it. She hated to see another maid go red and white for a "think so."

"We kept company—till you came," Osceola confided chokingly. "He promised to bring me a ring."

"Do you—like him?" pursued Laurie, putting her hand gently on the girl's arm.

"Who could help it!"

On the point of replying, Laurie generously locked her lips and refused to say, but the other guessed.

"Cal's dearer than you think him," she cried jealously. "He says wonderful things. He's very loving, and he can be gentle when he wants. He's good to children and to dogs, and he hasn't any folks. Often when he laughs he isn't happy, but sad, because he's lonely or hurt. You can see it in his eyes. Those who can't see it get angry, but I can see it and I'm sorry. I want nothing more on earth than just to make him happy—to take his hair out of his eyes and lay it back on his head—and—and kiss him. He let me—before you came." She flung the light hand from her arm.

"Don't leave off liking me," begged Laurie, more or less incoherently. She was filled with amazement and disgust at finding herself a third party to this too naked romance, and was inclined to hate her own femininity for thus bringing her willy-nilly into the open market to be a recipient for male attentions and female suspicions. "It is not my fault, Osceola dear. I'll try to—to help you. Really!"

At this promise the little cracker girl cheered vividly. The conversation had not outraged any of her ideas of true delicacy. Osceola had the broad-gauge purity of the natural mind which permits no artificial refinements to introduce shame where it does not belong. Young men and young women were formed to fall in love and marry; if they failed to do this Osceola could not see where the pretty homes were to come from, nor the cheerful hearth fires, nor the dear little children, nor the good meals, nor any of the proper daily tasks of human kind.

Vaguely but sufficiently soothed, she set to work

again on the sweet potatoes. Laurie, approving of the example, followed it.

"What a noise the jays are making!" she presently observed, not only to manufacture comfortable speech, but because the birds were carrying on a clamor that merited special mention.

An excited colony of them were dashing in and out of a shrub shrieking words unfit to print.

"They often do like that when they see a snake," said Osceola, glancing around her in a precautionary way. "Jays hate bad snakes worse than I do and that's a lot."

"Osceola, you've snakes on the brain this morning."

"And that's the only safe place to have them. Take a snake from your brain and the first thing you know you'll step on it."

Then the air filled with some Fifth Avenue sounds that totally outclassed the jays for racket and relegated snakes to proper oblivion, for first with a toot, then with a honk, then with a squawk, a skipping, battered little automobile reeled in at the gate and hopped towards them through the grove, ploughing up sand in which it staggered like a lost beetle.

"It's Biddle and Hopkins!" cried Laurie, recognizing him after a long look. She had not seen this dual gentleman since the day of her arrival, and she now pleasurably ranked him with friends from home. She jumped up from her furrow and quite excitedly ran to meet him, her hands extended in sandy but sincere cordiality.

Mr. Hopkins leaped from the rollicking car even before he had wholly checked its blithe progress, and accepted the extended members in a double grip, madly shaking them.

"Honey, I didn't know as you'd speak to me," he announced when he finally let go and stepped back to survey her. "My, my, Miss McAllister, but you sure grow prettier and prettier." Then recalling his profession and its demands, he added, "That's Florida."

"Why did you think I wouldn't speak to you?" she asked, tugging her braids exuberantly. Mr. Hopkins' forty odd years had left his round face so boyish that she became a little girl to match, and most little girls grow exuberant when told that they are "prettier and prettier."

"Because of the deal I put over on you, thinking you were a man, honey. But I've made this trip just to tell you that I'm trying my worst to sell your place, so cheer up!"

"Cheer up for that reason? Never! And sell? Not an inch! Do tell me what you are talking about, Mr. Hopkins."

"Talking about this foot-in-the-grave grove, Miss McAllister. When I made you buy it and came all the way down from New York I thought you were a man, and that calmed my conscience, for I knew a man could win out with it, lemon as it was. But me, oh my, when I saw you there on the boat landing at Perseverance, you so young and sweet, and no thicker than a sprig of mignonette, and with the old gent to care for, I swore me an oath I'd get you your money back or go out of business. I know of one buyer at least who'll pay you cash and let you go home."

"Go back to New York?" asked she in a panic. "Why, Mr. Hopkins, what would I do in New York that I can't do better here? Give up twenty acres of warm sunshine and a whole lake to sit beside a stone-cold radiator and look out of the window at a snow-

plow? The idea! What do you think we had for breakfast this morning?"

"Give it up!"

"Grapefruit, toast, marmalade, and new-laid eggs! Cost? Less than four cents. What do you think we're going to have for lunch?"

"Can't think! Tell me!" Seeing whither these gastronomics tended, the real estate man was welcoming them quite frantically.

"Fresh fish, lettuce, and tomatoes! Dinner is to be roast quail, baked Amys, pecan nuts, and homemade citron cake. Cost? Nothing!"

"Quit, honey, you're making me hungry!"

"Grandpa is happy as a lark. I'm reading books on citrus culture, studying half the night and working all the day. I'm no man but *I'll* win out! You take my word for it."

He did, and he took her two hands for it too, shaking them madly again.

"That's the talk," he cried. "Didn't I tell you Florida would lay a spell on you? Doesn't it lay a spell on everyone? Didn't it lay a spell on *me*?" His emphasis intimated that the last spell taxed the state's cleverest work. "When I lived up no'th in cities, and looked the business field over, I found I'd have to have graft and a million dollars to buck in, so I came down here with pluck and a hundred and found it aplenty. Of course you'll win out!"

"So don't say 'sell' to me again," she counseled, freeing her aching hands with a smile. With the words she wondered who in the world the prospective buyer might be, remembering Roycroft's criticism that no sane person would take the grove as a gift. "But I wish you'd tell me who was thinking of purchasing."

Hunnerton Hopkins whistled "Old Black Joe" and thought weighingly.

"Well, in the event of your acceptance, I wasn't to tell you," he admitted. "But I can't see the harm now it's no go. The fellow was a Londoner who lives on the far side of the lake."

"Mr. Roycroft?" she asked, scarcely crediting it.

Hunnerton Hopkins screwed up his baby mouth and nodded assentingly.

"That's the chap. Last person in the county who needs to buy, but said he was ready any time you needed to sell. Why? Lord only knows. There isn't any *Englishman* who can understand an Englishman, so why expect *me* to? Though I sure like that Roycroft. He's white clear through. I really think he's quite a damn sort of man." This use of the adjective clearly lifted it above reproach. "He's the first Englisher I ever met who can praise his own country without giving mine a black eye, and the only one who can praise mine without sounding like he was donating a stick of penny candy to a kid. Let me tell you about last fourth of July. That dern fool of a Peter, thinking to make things pleasant, let fly an American flag over Roycroft's house! And did the Englishman order it down? Not much he didn't. Just laughed and said that since it was flag day he'd bring out the Union Jack. Which he did. And was the Union Jack five times bigger than the Stars and Stripes? It wasn't. It was the same size. Don't you call that quite a damn sort of a man?"

"Yes," said Laurie, not stopping to censor the wording.

"What's those setting up in the sacks so nice?" curiously demanded the Biddle part of Mr. Hopkins,

his eye chancing to light on the two-bushel bags of sweet potatoes.

So she told him the story of the yams up to date, and no sooner had she confided the fact that cartage was not yet arranged for and might cost a woeful penny and trim down profits painfully, than he had dashed to a sack and staggered with it to his car. He put in four without in the least heeding her remonstrance.

"I'll tote the whole load, day by day, and not charge you a bean," he insisted.

"But I mustn't let you! It's an imposition," she fruitlessly argued.

"You've lifted a load off my mind today so I'll lift a load off yours," he said, cranking his car and climbing in. "And it's no imposition. Why, if I could afford the luxury I'd buy four sacks just to carry around as passengers and keep this bird of a car out of the air. My best regards to the deef old gent. By-by, honey."

And he was off.

The girl returned to her yam partner and reported this last stroke of good news. Then, before resuming her lowly seat in the furrow, she gathered an armful of vines and dragged them towards her in an effort to uproot them. Immediately an extraordinary vibration rose on the air, attracting attention by reason of its peculiar difference from any other known sound, resembling somewhat the crackling "Brrr!" of a tree locust on a sultry day, but having no such peacefulness, filled rather with angry, sinister warning and menace.

"What's doing that?" she asked surprisedly of the girl at her feet, receiving a second surprise and shock

at catching sight of the signs of fright on that girl's rigid face.

"*Don't move,*" whispered Osceola.

"What was it?" asked the other, using the past tense because the sound had ceased.

"Don't take a step or make a move after I tell you —it's a rattler."

"Where?"

"I don't know yet. I'll find out. But whatever you do, stand still. If you make a step you may die."

So cautiously that the action was almost imperceptible, Osceola pressed her hand in the sand till the sand ran in and filled it. Then she rapidly flung it broadcast. At once the venomed challenge came again, whirring from among the roots of the vine whose straying tendrils had just been disturbed.

"There he is. Look at him. Isn't he horrible?" whispered Osceola, having to moisten her dry lips before she could articulate.

Horrible he was, yet with a kind of baleful magnificence, too. He was fully ready for what should come next, for he was piled coil on coil—making half of a keg out of himself—and from the center of the coils was slightly upreared the wicked flat head with eyes coldly gleaming from under penthouse lids. The disgusting browns and tans of the sluggish looking monster toned in so perfectly with the hues of the sand and the dry vines that they had succeeded in keeping him fairly undistinguishable, though rendering him now —after discovery—the most visible thing in the universe. The seven flattened buttons on the tail shone like gun metal.

"I'll fix him," promised Laurie, as yet too interested to be frightened. She unostentatiously drew her steel

pocket-companion and aimed it. "Wasn't he the square beast, though, to let us know? I feel as if I ought to return the compliment. Snake, I'm going to kill you."

"Quit fooling," implored the crouching Osceola. "If you miss him what'll you do?"

"Shoot again; but I won't miss. Which end do I go for, Osceola—the bite or the rattle? Honestly, I don't know."

"Head. Oh, Laurie, hurry!"

Laurie fired. Almost simultaneously with the crack the rattlesnake became headless, writhingly uncoiling itself high in the air, vainly attempting muscular retaliation, only to fall straight and inert as a thick rope—five and a half feet of conquered devilry.

The headless spring and the flop were such loathsome exhibitions that Laurie eased her feelings by emitting a blood-curdling scream. Then both girls fascinatedly laid out the reptile and measured him, handling him as a Chinaman does rice—by chopsticks.

After sufficiently feasting herself upon its hideousness Osceola ran up to the house, coming immediately back with a box of matches.

"We have to burn it," she announced, a trifle shamefacedly but with no lack of determination. Forking him with a stick she laid him upon a hastily improvised funeral pyre of roots and twigs. "If you burn a rattler you never see another on your place, no matter how long you live."

"Surely you don't believe such darky lore!"

"No, I don't believe it," hesitated Osceola, "but it's so," she stubbornly concluded, and applied the lighted match. "That nigger Peter told Tallahassie he'd killed one rattler on your place, and was watching

out for the other—they travel in pairs. I reckon there's no more, anyhow."

The mention of Peter not unnaturally directed the girls' glances to the place whence he had lately appeared. And now from there came Charles Roycroft, running headlong out of the woods as if on a life and death relay race. Such was his speed that his hair rayed backward from him, meteor fashion. No Greek lad in Olympian contest ever covered as much ground in less time.

"Now that's the grandest dash I ever saw," commented Laurie, taking impartial joy in it. Her Anglo-American sporting blood tingled through her veins in happy fire. "Mr. Charles Colin Roycroft is generally what your mother calls 'Come day, go day, God send Sunday.' Didn't know he had that much life in him."

Her enjoyment was not permitted to feed itself, however, for young Hermes of the winged heels slackened his pace the moment that he perceived the safety of the two girls, and was soon haughtily stalking, doubtless fostering within himself those sensations of chagrin that rightfully belong to a man who has made a spectacle of himself for nothing. When he reached them there remained only his quick breathing, his becomingly mussed hair, and his glowing cheeks to remind them of his god-like spurt.

"I heard the shot and the scream, and thought you had been hurt," he explained very coldly.

"And now are vexed to find we're not?" asked Laurie.

She felt cheated of a due, for he had been content to take one calm comprehensive view of the cooking reptile and then forget it. Never to insist upon an

explanation of the sufficiently obvious was one of his poor points as often as one of his good.

"Since I am here I will look over your grove with you, McAllister," he remarked, still panting, but not too breathless to be chaffed without paying back.

Excusing herself to Osceola, who now had gabbling Tallahassie and staring Lee around the novel bonfire, Laurie took the stalwart young citrus expert on a medical tour up and down the rows of her doctored grove. He felt its tongue and examined its pulse, so to speak, with silent care. There might have been two opinions about his sociability, but only one in regard to his thoroughness—what he undertook he finished.

"Cottony-cushion scale has appeared in the vicinity," he observed at the end of the first ten minutes.

"Has it?" she asked, aware of no particular objection.

This artless ignorance—and nothing is more dangerous in a fruit section than artless ignorance—kept him silent ten minutes more.

"That's what I'm looking for in these trees," he then remarked.

"Found it?" was her contribution at the end of the half hour.

"No."

"Then it can't be bad, for I have everything bad that's coming to me," she commented cheerfully, not to let him sink into silence again.

"Pardon me. It is a pernicious pest. I wish you to inspect your grove for it daily. If you discover it, report it to me and I will send you some lady beetles."

"Send me some——?" She opened her eyes wide for the rest.

"Australian lady beetles—the only thing known to conquer the scale."

"Then I hope I get some scale," she said, yearningly. "I'd love to see the beetles."

Frigidly deciding not to hear this ribaldry, he continued his inspection of the grove. In his creaseless khaki outfit he was as yellow and sturdy as a sun-god. The cleanly health of him was good to see, suggesting a reserve fighting force that would be able to wage successful battle against any difficulty that life or love might see fit to send him.

Laurie walked beside him with a soul that took a vacation from care and skimmed a while on wings. His capable presence lightened the very hardships that he pointed out.

"You are storing up trouble for yourself unless you lay this grove with woodpiles from end to end," he announced, pocketing his magnifying glass to intimate that the silent part of the review was over. "I told you to do so. Why did you not?"

"After paying for the fertilizer and for the work of applying it I had no money left," she answered, very meek because of feeling guilty of having neglected an assigned task. She felt nervous too, for her face was now the target for his keen clear eyes. For some reason or other she breathed easier when he looked at oranges. She wished he would look at oranges again. She knew herself to be in very unpicturesque disarray. Her workaday skirt was most brutally matted with sand-spurs. They grew knee-high in the grove, and they had skewered her garment together until it not any too dimly suggested trousers. They had even lodged their vicious prongs in her long bright braids, the ends of which she picked up and disconsolately

played with. "I tried to drag the wood myself, but I couldn't."

"And shouldn't," he supplemented severely. "But by now I know better than to offer you any help—without making the extremely manly request that you pay for it!"

"I never heard the virtue of independence mentioned more shabbily," she remarked, sucking a finger that a sand-spur had wounded. "I should think a man would be pleased to see an individual woman practicing the justness that he denies the sex as a whole."

She invariably presented him with an annoying platitude when she wished to free herself from his regard. He disliked evasiveness, and particularly so when it took the form of badinage.

In the interest of common sense he went back to business matters.

"Oranges are still soaring," he said. "I cannot forgive that shark for taking advantage of you. Sixty cents a box! And they may touch three dollars!"

"Yet once they brought only thirty-two cents, so you said. What makes them wiggle so?" She knew this was no word to please him, but for the life of her could not think of "fluctuate" till too late.

"Anything. Nothing. Oranges go up and down like stock. Until bought and paid for they are a risk to the grower. Talking of paid for, has Herman Selig settled with you for the yams?"

"Not yet," she confessed.

"You are still digging them?"

"Yes."

"Do you think you are wise?"

"I have to take a person's word, Mr. Roycroft, and can't afford to decline a chance—even a bare

chance—of earning some money. That was why I was glad to sign away the fruit crop for sixty cents a box. He said I had four hundred boxes, and when I multiplied by sixty cents and got two hundred and forty dollars—in my head—it seemed a fortune—almost enough to keep grandpa and me for a year.

"Two hundred and fifty dollars—not fifty pounds—a *year!*"

"It sounds impossible, but we do it—down here. Our expenses are only twenty dollars a month and we live like fighting cocks." To herself she wondered what ill turn of the crank of Fate always made her say things like "fighting cocks" to this fastidiously frowning young aristocrat when she never said them otherwise, never even thought fighting cocks.

She felt herself flush faintly under his intent scrutiny, even though that scrutiny was of a blankly absorbed kind, such as a man might use who studied a problem in Euclid.

"What's going on inside your mind now?" she asked, uneasily resentful.

"An excerpt from a Scotch ballad," he answered stiffly.

"Excerpt it a little more and let me hear it," she demanded in defiance of her knowledge that he hated to have his seclusions raked open.

"Her face it is the fairest that e'er the sun shone on,"

he said with iceberg rigidity.

She examined it carefully for relevance.

"I guess that's an English joke," she observed, giving it up. "A punchless Punchism, is it?"

"It may be."

"You make your jokes potential? That's sensible. Talking of jokes, Mr. Hopkins told me a *good* one."

"Ye—es?"

"Ye—es. Said there was someone who was willing to buy my place. That shows there's another humorist in the world besides myself."

"It might be your best move to sell if you can."

"When I sell I promise you you will be the first one to be told," she answered dryly.

"You are going to stay and fight it out?" he asked, with a show of genuine eagerness.

"Didn't I tell you I would?"

"That was before you knew how hard it would be."

"Yes, it is hard. These are laboring, snaky days. I'd almost forgotten that snake. Up north I'd have talked it for seven years."

His breath came quickly again at her mention of the gruesome incident that had brought him speeding from the woods.

"I must not detain you longer, Miss Laurie, but before I go may I shake hands with you for the grittiest girl I ever met?"

Now that word "grittiest" was unfortunately chosen, reminding her that her once well-kept little hands were now gritty indeed, grimed to the bone by the sands of the yam patch. They would have lain like small coals in his outstretched white palm.

"It isn't necessary," she answered, whipping the discreditable members behind her back, holding her head high because of remembering the probable fact that the lovely girl in his watch had lily fingers.

"You are offended too readily," he said with coldness and pride.

Then he walked off.

CHAPTER XII

"OFFENDED!" whispered Miss McAllister, happily offering the word to the scenery for what it was worth. "I am glad he thinks that I am offended rather than to think I am—or thinks that I feel—oh, I don't know what I am talking about. But how glorious the day is! And how fine and fearless the lake looks! Some day I'm going to borrow Lohengrin's swan and go out for a little paddle by myself, and maybe get near enough to the other side to catch a glimpse of his house and grove. I wager they are kept up to the nines, the way he keeps himself. I am rather pleased to know that he thinks I am brave, for *I* have sensible doubts about it. He seemed nicer today than ever before. Thank you, snake."

Wrapped in the causeless, indescribable elation which Roycroft had power to wrap around her like a magic cloak, she meandered dreamily back to her former field of labor.

Lee and Tallahassie had gone. They never took particular pleasure in the undiluted society of their older sister, being too certain of hearing from her in regard to their obvious shortcomings. Osceola was alone, and was rapidly emptying the few remaining hills. In spite of the grime and heat she had kept her pink muslin dress unspotted and uncrushed, and she had kept her wild-rose face unstreaked. She graced the lowly furrow like a fresh flower blown from a bush.

In self-centered anxiety to continue to improve she greeted her yam partner with the next line of the "Elegy."

"Large was his bounty and his soul sincere."

This happened to accord so tunefully with the general tenor of that partner's musings as to induce her to respond,

"I think so, too." After placing this sentiment on record, Laurie sat herself down to the grubbing.

Under her mushroom-shaped man's hat Osceola looked scandalized.

"That's not your line," she scolded.

"Oh!" Laurie reluctantly waked.

"Heaven did a recompense as largely send,"

she murmured apologetically, then dreamed again.

"He gave to misery all he had—a tear,"

continued Osceola, frowning.

Again Laurie came to the surface with a start.

"And gained from heaven—'twas all he asked—a friend."

Then she rebelled and said coaxingly, "Oh, Eola, lassie, life itself is such a lovely poem! Let's shut the books a while and listen to it."

"It may be well enough for you to talk that-a-way —that way—but how about those whose life is *not* a poem, Laurie? From books come my whole happiness. For the sake of being able to buy books I have worked in this ground, though I hate the sun, hate work that

makes my hands dirty. Books keep me from running away and doing something desperate. What else have I to live for but for the comfort I can glean from a page 'rich with the spoils of time'—as this poem says?"

"Osceola, you are too sensible to talk such nonsense. The idea of a girl with a mother, a father, a brother, and two sisters hinting that she has nothing to live for but books!" Laurie's orphan-heart throbbed protestingly.

"But it's true," persisted Osceola, taking a certain gloomy joy in thus being able to prove herself different from the ordinary run of girls. "What pleasure are my people to me? None. So I turn to books. Books keep me from thinking of my unbearable home."

"Osceola, I won't stand another word like that," warned Laurie, filled with a resolve that was not the sudden caprice of the moment, but had been growing through many days, feeding itself upon first this incident, then that, being born perhaps of the thrill of pity she had felt for Mrs. Carter at the time that that indomitable cheerful one had said, "You-all save the tin cans an' I'll make the view."

"Why are you looking at me as if you was angry—were angry with me? *Me!*" said the cracker girl shortly.

"Because I am. Yes, open your big eyes; and maybe you'll never look at me in kindness again, for I'm going to tell you what I think of you."

"You told me you liked me," reminded Osceola, almost warningly.

"I more than like you; I love you. I can't help it; you are so pretty, and you try so faithfully to make the best of yourself. I believe in that, but I believe in making the best of other people, too. But you evi-

dently don't. So there I think you are selfish and cruel."

In much mental commotion, Laurie dropped the last yam on its heap, and then locked her trembling hands in her lap, shaken by proper doubts as to the advisability of ever speaking naked truth to a fellow creature. Now, however, there was nothing to do but to continue. A truth that is half stripped is much more offensive than one which is nobly nude.

"Selfish? Cruel?" The Florida girl recoiled from these accusations with indignation and distrust.

"Awfully so. What you need is not to be kept from thinking of your home, but made to think of it more. Almost everything that is wrong about your home life —and I admit there's plenty—is your own fault."

"Have you gone crazy?" hinted Osceola.

"No, I've come sane, and dare speak out. Your people did not educate you to be a burden and a faultfinder, but to help to lift them. And have you tried? Have you tried to share the knowledge? You know you haven't. Does little Tallahassie want to be untidy and ignorant? Every word she says is proof to the contrary. If I were blessed with a little sister I'd teach her and wash her and darn her some stockings! The stockings are more necessary for health's sake than for looks' sake. *You know that.*"

"Are you trying to—daring to——"

Tallahassie's sister found herself unable to put the accusation in words, bound to secrecy by the inherited narrowness of a set of people who think that family pride is best preserved by refusing to admit the presence of a discreditable ailment in their midst instead of seeking the publicity of a cure.

But the arraigner went on undaunted.

"Yes, I'm trying. I dare. For Tallahassie's sake. Fortunately the child appears to be recovering from the trouble in her feet. It is your duty to take care of her so that it won't come back. She's just in a condition to catch that dreadful thing that poor Lee is suffering from."

"Why are you dragging in Lee? What do you mean by 'that dreadful thing?'"

Osceola twisted her hands together in useless protest, for the other went courageously on.

"I mean just what you mean. I am coming to Lee presently. I want to say something in regard to your mother now, your generous mother who goes in real rags because she has no time to sew. You make pretty dresses for yourself; have you ever made her one, a really pretty one?"

"She wouldn't wear one!"

"I didn't ask you that. I asked if you had ever made her one. Have you, Osceola? Have you?"

"No!"

Giving Osceola absolutely no time to turn the tables by asking the pertinent question: "Whose business is all this?" Laurie took pains to keep up the attack.

"Suppose you follow my suggestion and make her the very nicest dress you can?"

"For her to smear with tobacco juice?"

"Tobacco or no, she's twice as artistic as you, for she has trimmed the bare house with flowers till it's one big bouquet. You can't tell me that such a person wouldn't just love to wear a pretty dress that her eldest daughter made her. Now for your duty to Lee——"

Osceola's increasing anger here took on a shade of fear, causing her to glance furtively over her shoulder

as though to guard against a chance listener, or as though she doubted the discretion of the very landscape.

"You leave Lee alone," she cautioned.

"Lee has been left alone too long. You know what 'big lazies' is as well as I do. Better. It's hookworm disease."

"How dare you say that my brother has anything so abominable and disgraceful?"

"Because he has, the poor boy. And if your pages 'rich with the spoils of time' haven't taught you that it is a disease less disgraceful than dangerous, they haven't taught you much. Lee's body is nearly worn out, and his mind is preparing to go the same way. Why don't you plan to earn some money and send him over the border to Georgia where that new sanatorium is and cure him? But you say you intend to spend your potato money on books. More books. You'd better burn the few you have and then turn around and be the home angel that you ought to be and can be. You think you know more than the rest of them. Then show it. That's all. I've done."

"And it's time!" cried Osceola very poignantly. She jumped up, trembling with distress and rage. "Because you come from New York you think you can say what you please!"

"I'd have said the same if I'd come from the Kilkenny coast," observed Laurie, not to be aggravating but to be truthful. She, too, rose to her feet, hardly more at ease than the other girl.

"You think you can talk as insultingly as you like to a cracker. Well you can't. I'm not ashamed of being a cracker. I'm proud of being one!"

"That's the best thing you've said yet."

"You think you're above me because you have robbed me of my sweetheart!"

"Osceola!"

"Keep him!"

This last taunt was so frenziedly childish as to call for pity rather than for disdain.

"I really don't want him, Osceola," mentioned Laurie composedly.

But the Florida girl was in no mood to be placated.

"He's not either!" she cried, vaguely but hotly denying the implied. "He's big and fine and good looking."

"Still I don't care to have him around. If you do, why don't you show him that you can be a housekeeper?"

"Oh, haven't you a word of mercy?" Osceola shrunk like a caged animal that has been prodded too much. "And I thought you liked me!"

"I love you," said Laurie, big tears coming to her lashes.

Osceola's storm of anger turned to equally stormy grief.

"Laurie, Laurie!" she cried in tone of final parting. Then she dropped her burning face in her hands, and, bending like a flower in a pelting rain, ran frantically home.

Laurie stood and watched the last flutter of her pink dress merge disappearingly into the distance, feeling exactly as if she had slapped a fairy and apprehended being made properly sorry for it.

"The only girl in the county, apparently, and now I'll maybe never see her again," was her contrite and miserable reflection. "But there is no use pretending to be sorry I did it, for I'd do it over."

Then lunch loomed on the domestic horizon and obliterated outside disturbances by providing sufficient of its own. After that, the rest of the day slipped by in the semi-busy, drowsy fashion of Florida's fragrantly hot afternoons, till once again the miracle of coming evening was upon the land, bringing the blush of sunset to the western sky, and to the paler east the silver thread of a young moon.

This poetical hour which lets loose the leash of romance and sets free the subtlest perfumes of the flowers, sending the human heart a-roving too, is also the wretchedly prosaic one which relegates the careful châtelaine to the kitchen again, no matter how substantial the noontide lunch.

Coming out to pump a kettle of water, Laurie ecstatically surveyed the crescent goddess in the primrose sky, and rapturously breathed in the heavy attar of roses.

"This is my idea of paradise," she murmured, fancying she was communing with solitude.

"Fits in with mine, too, now you-uns is come out," came in the Georgian's deep voice.

Six foot one of turpentine-blackened overalls and blouse shirt, he was seated loungingly on the lowest step of the porch stairs, filling it formidably, and, by some moral attribute peculiarly his own, accentuating by his very presence the loneliness of the hour and the remoteness of the locality.

"Why didn't you knock?" asked she shortly. "I hate to be startled."

When she glanced away from him to the sky the new moon gleamed cold as a knife.

"You're easy startled," he answered.

By this drawling sarcasm he drew attention to his

occupation of the moment, which was certainly Arcadian and peaceful in outward appearance, for he was throwing food to the crippled chick that pecked confidingly in the vicinity of his huge brogans. One hand had to suffice for the feeding process, for the other hand was held patiently open to serve as an ample cot for the idiot kitten. Little Eva lay coiled therein in trustful slumber.

After a few zoölogical remarks, Laurie pumped her kettleful and broke the news of her retirement for the evening.

"I can't ask you in to supper," she mentioned firmly, not intending to dally politely with that issue for fear of his acceptance.

"I hain't come for food," he answered, smiling mysteriously up at her.

His bold good looks were intensified by the glamor and softness of the evening hour, and he bulked very substantially into the foreground of affairs. But to this particular girl he personified menace rather than ornament, and was safer at a distance considerably removed from his present one.

"Well, then, good night," she stated definitely.

"Sure. Good night," he returned with a low laugh.

So she went inside, and when there, shot the bolt with an allegorical clang, then sat down to supper feeling all the satisfaction of the successful strategist.

Supper went off in a hurry this evening because The McAllister had that day received his Edinburgh paper and was anxious to acquaint himself with all of the real news of the world. The fact that it was two weeks later than the news of the New York papers taken by his granddaughter was a drawback that was more

than offset by the dignity of the type and language in which it was presented.

"I refuse to lower my intellect by perusing the blue and red outbursts of trash and vulgar sensationalism of American journalism, so-called!" he remarked when she ensconced him at the parlor table with his beloved sheet and a reading lamp.

This was a favorite remark of his and was noticeably never uttered until he had read every line of the blue and red outbursts from end to end.

By way of answer Laurie kissed the top of his silvery white head. She felt that this response was safer and more dutiful than any verbal one she could truthfully make, because, for herself, she was already "lowered" to the extent of requiring to see a headline in crimson letters half a foot long before she could convince herself that anything had really happened in the world. This is one of the penalties one pays for the privilege of having been born in the borough of Manhattan.

Then she went into that secluded domestic realm known as the back of the house, and, after filling a saucer with milk for Little Eva, she opened the symbolical bolt—a thing, by the way, that any burglar worth the name could have pried loose with the little finger of his left hand—and stepped out again upon the porch which was now the darkest nook of night.

At the lowest edge of the black sky the frightened little thread of new moon was hurriedly sinking.

"Consider I've knocked," drawled the deep voice, coming from where it had come before.

When her eyes became used to the dark, whose opaqueness seemed to roll silently upward in successive curtains like mists in a Christmas pantomime, dis-

closing a night world that was fairly luminous after all, she saw that Calhoun Tandy was in the spot where she had left him. The lame chick was humped in slumber on top of one of the mountaineer's huge boots and the grateful kitten was still curled in the warmth of his broad hand.

Laurie sat down the saucer before attempting to speak. She felt a peculiar need of freeing herself from all possible encumbrances.

"You should have gone home," she said, rather wondering why she was allowing herself to be frightened at a situation which was only an amusing one, only an evidence of the inability of a Georgia cracker to cope with the subtleties of the social code. "I virtually told you to go."

"An' I virtually calc'lated I'd stay," he replied. "Now that I've 'knocked' you ain't too 'startled' to come down the steps an' have a talk, are you?"

"Certainly not," she answered, swallowing her indignation at the sarcasm and swallowing it with difficulty for the reason that she now began to fear that she had shown distrust without cause.

She descended the broad steps until she was at the bottom one whose house-corner he loungingly occupied.

Then when he spoke it was with a sudden growl of anger and threat.

"You set, Laurie McAllister! You set an' act friendly!" he ordered.

After a quick breath of indecision she finally seated herself at the extreme farther end of the step.

"Now then, what do you want?" she asked.

"First an' foremost, I want you sh'd come and take yore cat."

"Put it down," she said, struggling with a desire to

smile. The command had been surprisingly inane.

"You do as yo're bid," shot from him furiously.

"Put it down!" she repeated, losing the desire to smile.

"Come, take it or I chuck it," he said, making a fiercely illustrative move in the general direction of a tree against whose trunk the unsuspecting white kitten could easily have been battered to its death.

"I'll come and get it," cried Laurie, growing suddenly sick at heart.

She moved along the step an inch at a time till she was near enough rescuingly to scoop Little Eva from the man's hand. That hand's freed fingers immediately grasped her arm and held her fast in her unsought proximity.

Cal Tandy then gave way to one of his silent spasms of helpless amusement, saying, as he again took possession of the kitten in order to place it safely upon the ground, but holdling tight to his prisoner the while:

"I'd no more hurt a li'l cat that had come to me to fall asleep than you-uns 'ud shoot a bullet through a piece o' live flesh."

"Loose my arm and see how quickly I'd do it!" she panted indignantly.

To a degree he accepted this dare inasmuch as he prisoned her around the waist, leaving her arms free.

"Go on an' try," he permitted. "But you air makin' me mad an' it ain't ever a good plan."

"It is anything but manly of you to act this way or talk this way," she said, trying to convince him by her earnest, matter-of-fact tone. "Why don't you play the gentleman?"

"I calc'late I am. I've studied into their ways some.

I want you—I want *you*. Understand that? An' what I want I take. There's about all there is to it."

"That's no way to talk either," she said, bent on keeping her voice steady and her mind unafraid. She was never a hunter for trouble, but she knew it when she met it, and it was here now, in this silent, lonely hour, in this silent, lonely place, where no human scream could hope to be distinguished from the constant screech of the night owl, and where a shot would be set down as an attack on the flying squirrel that raids in the dark and has to be punished in the dark. She let her useless revolver lie idle in her pocket, and cleared her wits for action. "Calhoun Tandy, if you are asking me to marry you I thank you for the intended honor—for I suppose you mean it to be an honor, though you don't know the words for it—I thank you, but emphatically decline. Now let that settle it."

He gave an angry laugh. The feathered infant in splints slid from his boot, and, after a few frightened, disconcerted cheeps, humped itself in a corner.

"Talk don't settle nothing like facts does," announced Tandy, truly enough. "An' the facts is I'm a-holdin' you an' will keep a-holdin'."

In proof of this materialized theory he drew her closer to him.

"Let *facts* settle it my way then," she entreated. "Stop to think seriously a moment. You and I are not suited."

"Oh, I allow I don't talk you-uns talk," he said, lapsing into one of his swift furies. "But what's talk in the long run? 'Thout talk I kin keep a roof over yore pretty head an' food in yore mouth, an' I kin keep my heart clean for you. I'm goin' to take you back with me to Georgy, an' learn you to be con-

tented in the mountains where life is lived free, an' trouble don't come no nearer than a rifle lets it, an' a girl belongs to the man who kin take her, an' folks kin lie down to sleep at night 'thout havin' to be feared o' any tomorrow. When I first see you I swore I'd have you. I liked yore hair and yore skin. Then I liked yore voice an' yore sass an' yore spunk an' yore fight. Then I swore if you didn't give yo'self I'd take you an' make yo' glad of it by lovin' yo' truly. No, I can't talk you-uns talk, but I kin love the same as any man, an' love's what counts. I didn't have to go to skule to learn to kiss."

The bending closer of his big head, with its heavy thatch of black hair and drooping forehead-lock, her terrified hatred of the kiss he intended to give, endowed her with unexpected swift strength. She flung herself free from him, jumped to her feet, ran up the steps and tried to open the door.

"Don't you know I kin come in as easy as stay out?" he asked, rising tumultuously.

"And I am going to ask you in, really I am," she stammered truthfully. She nervously wanted to laugh at the prodigiousness of disbelief that stared from his dark face, but the idea had come to her that she was suffering from his attentions largely because she had never been seen by him except in her present country garb of short skirt, thick boots, and meek braids, representing the unmilitant type that aches to be thoroughly "bossed" by its hardy males who, in courteous return, treat them to plenty of drama in courtship. They consider drama necessary to all professions. A minister is paid according to the ability he has to "take on *grand*" in a funeral sermon. Laurie determined to show Cal Tandy that she was rather of the

type of woman who requires a certain amount of elegant comedy to spice her life. She was going to confront him in the armor of correct dress. "Truly, I'm going to invite you in," she concluded, daring again to smile.

"Tricks is no good," warned Cal. "Shut the door if you like an' bolt it same as you did afore, but toreckly I choose I'll smash my way in to you."

"You won't have to *smash!*" she exclaimed, indignant at having her word doubted even when doubt was natural on his part. "Give me fifteen minutes, please, and then I'll invite you in."

"And I'll come," he swore, doing it loudly that his voice should follow her well, for she had disappeared inside the house.

In not fifteen minutes but ten—surely the quickest change on record—she was in an ancient but still lovely ruin of a modest "party dress," a flounced affair of pale blue and silver. Her hair, which had been literally thrown into a *coiffure*, looked unusually beautiful.

"Couldn't have produced anything as satisfactory if I had combed and coiled for an hour," she told her reflection in the mirror.

Then she shattered the evening peace of The McAllister by appearing beside him with his creased but gorgeously satin-faced Tuxedo coat, and literally hustling him into it.

"The good Lord bless me and save me!" he spluttered, too much taken by storm to resist. "Will you explain, my love, why it is your pleasure to transform me into a mountebank?"

"You look like the duke-iest duke in the three kingdoms," she said admiringly, pinning a flower to his

lapel, "and please talk up to it, Grandpa, for we are going to have company." She opened the parlor door on the porch and observed musically to the starry darkness, "Won't you kindly step around to this door, Mr. Tandy, and come in?"

CHAPTER XIII

THE clumping rapidity with which the Georgian obeyed the request to step around, and the swift lunge with which he thrust himself inside the placid parlor, proved that his previous doubts concerning the invitation had gathered strength during the wait.

The plunging entrance, moreover, put him at a terrific disadvantage immediately, it nearly resulting in landing him upon all fours, for he skidded several feet upon a rug, sliding over the oiled floor as over wet ice, and righting himself only after a series of undignified jerks.

None of this conduced to his ease of manner or comfort of mind.

"Won't you sit down?" asked Laurie rather gravely, carrying a pained suggestion that Cal had skidded and skated from unseemly choice.

Her grandfather, with his aristocratic white head still reared haughtily as the result of his encounter with his enforced coat and ridiculous buttonhole bouquet, greeted the visitor with a majestic "How do you do, sir!" using exactly the tone of voice with which he would have uttered "Get out of my sight, sir!" Against his high-backed chair of cathedral solemnity his thin old face glowered very impressively. An ascetic bishop sitting on the inefficiencies of a flighty curate would have worn just such a look.

Laurie precipitately and purposely sat herself in the

only other large chair left, thus relegating Cal Tandy to a spidery-legged one owning a vast amount of style but absolutely no stability. When he sat down upon it it took a free spin, as the rug had done.

At this exhibition of added flightiness on the part of the curate the ascetic bishop positively glared. Even worse than he hated American journalism The McAllister hated a parlor clown.

And that parlor merited anything but circus-ring manners, being as clever an imitation of the real thing as was ever effected by girlish good taste and youthful courage, aided by oiled dust cloths in the near past, and assisted prodigiously in the present by the mellowing influence of the lamps. The flooring of dark pine wood was as smooth as constant rubbings could make it, and it splendidly showed up the few rugs. Sitting decorously close to the walls, the bits of old-fashioned furniture gleamed quite royally, and every piece whose nature permitted of it upbore a vase of flowers.

Cal Tandy's track across the floor was marked by a thin trail of sand from his heavy brogans. He occupied his parlor chair as incongruously and threateningly as a mountain lion would have done. His thick forehead-lock hung into his eyes like a mane through which his quick glances gleamed ferociously and suspiciously. Fully as much as he was dazed by the surprising vision in blue and silver was he uneasily fascinated by the fine severity of the old gentleman.

"Grandfather is extremely astonished at the attitude just taken by the British Admiralty," said the girl, explainingly, but using an explanation which merely dazed the more. She gracefully clasped her

braceleted hands in her blue silk lap and tilted her pretty head at a society angle. The excitement of the comedy had put a vivid rose-red flush into her cheeks, a flame as daring as rouge.

"The Premier's opinion has amazed me—*amazed* me!" said The McAllister, austerely following his granddaughter's conversational cue. "What, sir, may be your explanation of it?"

The fiery old gentleman asked this question with quite honorable intentions of properly entertaining his guest, having long ago learned the important lesson that, in Florida, no man's grimy outward condition is to be taken as an intimation of corresponding inward murk. And he rather naturally felt that no man without college-bred aplomb and well-nourished brains would undertake to pay an evening visit in turpentine-blackened overalls and feel equipped.

"Uh?" questioned Cal, growling it sullenly.

There was suffering in the growl as well as sullenness. He keenly realized that his former valuable assets of height, and big bone, and sinew, and bronzed good looks—as bold as they were bronzed—had all dropped unaccountably below par. They were no longer of value or of benefit to him. Here he found himself in need of a subtle something which the uncaring stars of his birth had barred forever from his horoscope.

The girl of his hot chase—she who had been frightened of him while in worker's clothes to match his own, and who therefore should logically have remained more or less frightened of him till the end of time—was now a serene princess, worlds removed from him, worlds above.

"I am not surprised, sir, that you require to think

over my question," granted Andrew McAllister superbly. "Permit me to await your pleasure."

"Uh-huh!" grunted Cal, using the sound as an angry negation, though he was denying he knew not what.

"Perhaps you have been more interested in the grave crisis now occupying the attention of Congress," said The McAllister, kindly jumping across the Atlantic Ocean, but losing much of his small stock of patience as a result of the jump.

"Uh-huh!" growled Cal again, denying more viciously this time, having recognized a word at last. What had he to do with Congress? Had not he helped elect a man to attend to that?

Then Andrew dragged him in and out among the continents in angry endeavor to put a tongue in him, but without once succeeding. After thus wasting a full half hour the old gentleman magnificently said "Tch!" and sat back in his chair, ostentatiously wrapping himself in dudgeon. He cast a glance at his granddaughter meaning, "You try to resuscitate this sorry corpse, my darling."

"You have not been reading the papers lately, have you, Cal?" she asked, purposely using his familiar nickname by itself.

"No, ma'am," he replied somberly.

And his last tragic syllable showed him and showed her that a dividing line was inexorably being drawn.

"Persons feel so hopelessly out of the world unless they do," she said, softly sighing as she recollected the miles between herself and Carnegie Hall and all the gentle arts and sciences that that fashionable barracks represents. "Let me tell you of a literature course lucky New York is enjoying this winter."

As she talked on he could only glare at her, want-

ing to seize her but unable—a mountain lion in a net.

Cal Tandy was clever enough to feel the trap, but not clever enough to break through it as he easily might have done. For though his knowledge was not type-fed he had some that was vital for that very reason. He owned facts that would have enabled him to snatch the talk into his own hands and to keep his listeners enchanted could he have sensed his unique possessions. He knew the songs of the turpentine camp, and knew its shady but thrilling legends. He had heard the mysterious "crick" of the sap as it ran backward through the pine tree, flying like a dryad from the advances of rough winter; he had spent weeks in a flamingo colony; he had patroled an egret swamp in mating season and helped keep the half-breed plume hunters at bay; he had served as warden on Pelican Island; he had seen a small king snake kill a huge diamond-back rattler; he had speared alligators at night by the light of a fat-pine torch; he could imitate the calls of birds; he had tamed those two untamable quantities, a quail and a cardinal-bird; he was past master in the craft of bass-fishing, not the hungry "trout" that will jump at almost any trolling-line, but the fighting twenty-pounders that are caught so seldom that the unskillful deny their existence in the quiet lakes. But Tandy did not know that he knew, which is a form of ignorance more hopeless than knowing that you don't know.

"Annie Laurie, my dear, perhaps the—the gentleman might care to hear some music," suggested The McAllister later, and in a reproving tone, for Cal was being made to listen to quoted fragments of Emerson's essay on "Compensation," and, in the opinion of The McAllister, Ralph Waldo Emerson had not been born

in the part of the globe that would have constituted him a philosophical authority.

Cal's tired eyes brightened. Music was his strong point. Give him an accordion and he could pull out any tune he had ever heard.

"I'll play with pleasure," agreed Laurie.

She promptly arose and went over to the organ. It was an ancient instrument as asthmatic as the pump, one of its notes mute by way of piquant variety. Anybody acquainted with the whims of an organ knows that a missing note is always the one most needed in a passage. Upon the mellow yellow ivories of this complaisant wreck Laurie played a lengthy composition calculated to put to sleep the musical desires of anyone not fully awake to the value of point and counterpoint, and to the beauties of clean technique—one of Bach's fugues.

Her grandfather listened with an admiration that was not assumed. He leaned back in musical abandon, ecstatically matching his long white fingers together.

But Cal Tandy twitched restlessly as the fugue interminably fugued on. Was it by this intolerable boredom that the alleged fortunate four hundred entertained a visitor? Then give him in preference a cordial Georgia kitchen, with a safely taut rag carpet to stand on, a strong settee to sit on, and, to join in, a song with a roaring chorus!

His badgered glance traveled furtively from the dainty organist to the raptly listening octogenarian, thence to his ungainly self whose warty hands and sandy brogans accused him of being where he was not wanted—more, of being where he himself no longer wished to be. Why ever had he come? A longing for the freedom of outdoors filled him achingly.

"I calc'late I'll be goin'," he announced, rising abruptly the first time the fugue drew a breath.

Acquiescingly, Laurie stood also.

"But partake first of some slight refreshment," courteously urged the old host.

Cal wavered. He had had no supper. Within him his mysterious digestic shrines, which at this hour were usually piled high with slabs of ham, multitudinous fried eggs, and wedges of prune pie, all comfortably soaking in six cups of coffee, were now neglected and bare, diffusing depression through soul as well as body. Refreshment?

"A soda biscuit and a glass of limeade," seconded Laurie.

"No, ma'am," refused Cal definitely. He clumped a cautious way to the door.

"Call again, sir," invited The McAllister, benign by reason of extreme relief over the departure.

Cal Tandy was not listening; he was looking piercingly at the girl.

"You-uns come outside till I tell you somepin," he told her shortly, then he flung himself through the door.

She followed him to the porch. There, in a night that glittered with stars and fireflies till the very darkness palpitated, she leaned against one porch post while the tall Georgian leaned against another. He shook his hair from his eyes, folded his long arms, and stood for a considerable time in wordless thought. Being a brother to the broad night and heaving lake, every minute he gained a dignity and power. And, unable to stop herself, she was trembling a little before him.

"I see all what you done—to me—in there," he observed finally.

Her only answer was to droop her head. In his deep voice she seemed to hear the lonely melody of the pine trees when the evening wind blows through them.

"You-uns aimed to show me I ain't nowise fit for you —in your pretty dress," he went on, stoically.

"Cal!" she cried, wistfully anxious to deny, but unable.

"That I wouldn't cotton to yore ways any easier than you'd cotton to mine—that the world ain't only men and women but—manners."

"Something like that, Cal," she murmured, distressed.

"Well, I've seen manners I think better of," he criticized stolidly.

"And that's what I want you to, Cal," she said earnestly, striving now to heal the wound.

"Enough o' that," he ordered shortly. "I know just what you think o' *me*—well, you haven't showed me much that I didn't know already. I might o' guessed I'd be set back where I most wanted to go forrard. I knew there was some kinds o' man I could never be, an' if it turns out there's some kinds o' girls I kin never get, why it's all of a piece with the rest o' my life, which has jes' been a-shuttin' o' one door atter another in my face. It beats me to know why Gawd lets us hunt for them doors an' find them. So be," he said, after more pause. "So be. I'll keep well away f'm here. But I hev to go on likin' you, Laurie McAllister, with your bright hair and white flesh an' trick o' hittin' the bull's eye. Remember I'm always ready to do for you."

"And there *is* something—something right now," she stammered. "You are so good to all small hurt things that it makes me think of Osceola——"

"Osceoly?" he asked, stiffly and suspiciously on his guard.

She reflected that it would never do to remind him of the lovelorn little maid as of a neglected duty. Tandy conspicuously loathed duties. She must put it differently.

"I've quarreled with her," she said. "She's so sensitive I'm afraid she'll feel sorrowful and lonely. If you could go see her once in a while——"

"Quarreled? What about?" he asked, knitting his heavy brows.

"I didn't like her ways and I told her so," she said, ingenuously using the words most likely to enlist his sympathy on the other side.

"You've thrown her down too, hev you?" he demanded, suddenly bitter. "My poor li'l wild bird of an Osceoly!"

He flung himself from the porch, taking one of his characteristically abrupt departures, and, striding swiftly as though from leprosy, was soon swallowed up in the night.

If blessings brighten as they take their flight, so do curses. Lost, Cal Tandy's visits began to have—in retrospect—their slightly entertaining side. For lost they were. On McAllister's grove the days went on without him, and went on without Osceola.

"I don't seem to have a soul left," Laurie told herself when working over a grapefruit tree one busy morning, propping up its branches on crutches to prevent the clusters of fruit from breaking their limbs.

She impressed strongly upon herself this statement of her loneliness so as to discount the unmaidenliness of a still stronger feeling that while the young Englishman continued to grove it on the opposite side of the

lake her world was full to overflowing. Charles Roycroft appeared every day, but the noble object of his visits seemed to be a desire to circumvent cottony-cushion scale, mealy bug, white fly, foot-rot, and frenching. The girl found it hard to encourage the circumvention of this last, for "frenching" is a deterioration that greatly beautifies a leaf, striping its green artistically with yellow. To the earnest culturist, frenching furnishes the same mental exercise that faults in the tariff furnish the government—no one knows what causes it or what to do about it, and only the hopelessly ignorant feel qualified to prescribe the cure.

In fall on a grove one has not time even for remorse. There had come a few more cool nights to color the fruit a deeper hue. It now shone out on the trees like Japanese lanterns with lighted candles inside.

"Oh, oranges, *do* hang on," she besought them, leaving the doctored grapefruit tree which now looked like an African hut on stilts, and standing almost reverently under a warty-skinned "king" of full promise. "You don't know what you really mean to grandpa and me. You are the only things between us and actual starvation."

"What say?" came in a guttural grunt from behind her.

She wheeled around and discovered Herman Selig. Heavy as he was, he had arrived on the silent feet of famine, or foreclosure, or any other of the disasters he allegorically stood for. The money lender looked fifty times smudgier by sunlight than by moon. He was in an overcoat so baggy and voluminous that when it was unbuttoned, as now, it switched the ground like Mrs. Carter's skirts. Black in its youth, it had matured

to a sad green. It looked as if it had descended to this son of Israel from his forefathers in the original twelve tribes, and had been devised to cover them all at once.

"My gracious," softly faltered the girl, after viewing this caricature and exonerating vaudeville from all charge of libel forever, "how long have you been here?"

He shrugged his stooped shoulders with the effect of shaking off such verbal nonessentials.

"And what have you come for?" she asked, not rudely, but out of deep apprehension. In her ignorance of law and its black powers she would not have been utterly surprised to hear him say he had come for the kitchen stove. "Has anything gone wrong yet?"

Again he shrugged his shoulders to lighten them of her remarks. Then after pounding his hat more securely to his head he secretively searched inside his lock-box pockets and drew out some wonderfully soiled greenbacks, handing them to her with the laconic snarl: "Yams."

"Oh, then you got them!" she cried, relieved. The sacks had all gone ricochetting down the county with Mr. Hopkins, but to what end she had not learned till now. "Sixty-five dollars!" she gloated, counting it. Sudden relief made her feel rather faint, and she fanned herself with the bills, murmuring, "You can't guess how pleasant it is to receive money instead of losing a piece of furniture, Mr. Selig. But you *can* guess how glad I am to get this wealth when I tell you that I am right down to my last dollar."

He scraped his stubbly chin, looking at her intently. In his beads of eyes was rather a sardonic glitter.

"Others would be glad to get moneys owing to them, too," was what he reflectively scratched out.

"That's so. This money is really yours, isn't it?" she blankly remembered. "But not all of it."

"Why not all of it when you owe a hundred—with interest?"

"Because I did not earn all this. Osceola Carter must have her share, and Tallahassie, and Lee."

"Everybody but Selig?"

"You can have half of it," she said, sighingly sorting out the bills and tendering them. "Perhaps I'd better pay you what I can now, so as to be on the safe side."

"Yes? And what is the safe side?" he asked, still scraping slowly, and making no attempt to take the offered money.

"The side that the foreclosed mortgage *isn't* on," she explained, very definitely. "Wouldn't it be better for me if you took a part payment now that you can get it?"

"Better for you?"

"Yes. In that deed there was something awful about a 'failure to pay a part.' I don't know exactly what it was, but it makes my flesh creep whenever I think of it, and I think of it night and day. Oh, please don't laugh!" she cried sadly, seeing a series of crinkles coming in the bristles around his mouth. "But advise me. I know so little about deeds and debts."

"That's evident."

"And you so much."

"Very much, and out of that much I've learned not to advise a woman. She never follows my advice." His voice grated unpleasantly.

"Maybe she doesn't if she has brains," said Laurie,

her main intention being to soothe him, "but I haven't any about business, and *I* follow your advice. Didn't I sign the mortgage? So tell me what to do next."

"For you to do something different?"

"No. I have faith in you. *I* knew you would pay for the yams."

"Then there was someone who did not," he deduced grimly. He began to roll an invisible dough ball between his palms.

"I am waiting for you to advise me," she intimated anxiously.

"Spend the money, not on me, but on the grove—immediately."

"The grove? It's a cormorant and swallows every cent I can lay my hands on," she mourned. "What does it need now?"

"Wood. Hauled in. Piled among the trees."

"Just what Mr. Roycroft said," she commented in a ruminating murmur.

"Roycroft? The very fine young gentleman who's pleased to dislike me?"

"We—e—ll," she began, hoping to reach strenuous denial, but never getting there.

"Good morning." Herman Selig turned on his heel with a swiftness that sent his coat dipping into the sand. "You asked my advice. I have given it." He trudged onward without one look back.

"Have you gone?" she asked, amazed. "Thank you —for the advice, I mean."

She followed that advice, too. After sending Osceola her share of the receipts by the honest but unwilling hand of ebony Peter, who had a contempt for the white Carters because they were so shiftless, she metaphorically shut her eyes to consequences—by "conse-

quences" she mostly meant the grocery bill—and blindly shed the yam money over the grove, hiring men to saw the fallen pines into huge logs and haul them into the rows between the citrus trees.

By the time this was done the end of November was upon the land, banishing the butterflies, but likewise banishing snakes, and bringing truck farms into productiveness, so that carts full of young vegetables began to travel the roads to the dock at Perseverance, their loads being shipped thence to towns in the more shivery north.

Congratulating herself upon a good thing well done, Laurie took Roycroft into her grove to approve of the work.

"Looks as if I'd gone into the business of raising pyres for martyrs, doesn't it?" she asked, pointing proudly to the display.

There were a hundred of these pyres, and the fire logs were piled generously high.

"How do you expect these to be kindled?" he criticized, after beating open a stack and gazing into the disclosed inside without special enthusiasm.

Then he switched his boots immaculately clean with his riding crop.

"I rather thought of applying a match to them," she answered ironically, "unless you recommend a cup of water."

"I recommend several barrels of turpentine waste."

"How do I get it?" she asked, her short-lived insouciance dying out.

So the insatiable grove was not yet content!

"Send to one of the turpentine camps."

The plural noun caught her attention.

"Is there another beside Calhoun Tandy's?" she

asked. If there was, she privately intended to drive there herself for the waste.

"You know Tandy?" he asked in turn. "Fine big giant, don't you know!"

"Yes, I know," she answered composedly, covering both ends of his remark. "Who else has a camp?"

"One Menefee, unless I am mistaken."

"Bill?" she asked delightedly, remembering a letter the mailman had tried to leave with her.

"In selecting your friends you appear to exercise a catholic spirit," observed Roycroft, quite disdainfully.

"Well, you have a few queer acquaintances, too," she replied, unvexed. "The queerest was around here the other day."

She thereupon told him of Selig's second visit. As she proceeded, the anger in Roycroft's bright eyes switched from poor Bill to the money lender and orange contractor.

"He *refused* to accept a partial payment on the mortgage?" he asked.

"Absolutely refused. Nice of him, wasn't it? Really nice. He would have left me without a cent if he had taken it."

Roycroft's riding crop came down upon his leg with an angry "Swish!"

"And instead of advising you to keep the money by you for emergencies had you spend it?"

"Yes. On the crop."

"Because it is likely to fail!"

The happy ground suddenly rocked beneath poor little McAllister's feet. Her hands came slowly together in a clasp as if she prayed.

"Fail?" she whispered incredulously.

"I spoke without stopping to think," he admitted, gnawing his lip, punishing it for luckless haste.

"That is when people generally speak the whole truth," she faltered.

"Do not permit an individual opinion to weigh so heavily with you," he urged.

She pondered this to see if there was any comfort in it, and there was not, for Roycroft was established authority the county round.

"What makes you think it will fail?" she asked faintly.

Hating his task, but too sincere to shirk it now it was here, he took hold of the first branch to meet his hand and shook it roughly. Amid a shower of leaves, much fruit fell dismally to the ground.

"Wouldn't anything come off—if you shook it like that—even my head?" she asked, piteously.

He made a swiftly negative gesture. "They fall because the trees are impoverished through years of neglect."

"But who intends to go around shaking them?" she demanded, willing to recover her usual confidence if only given half a chance.

"What will do the damage is a cold snap."

"Then a cold snap mustn't come," she began, trying to speak lightly, but gaining in anxiety by the very effort. "Oh, Mr. Roycroft, it mustn't come, it mustn't, it mustn't! Don't think me cowardly because I give way like this, but I am worn out trying to keep cheerful so that grandpa shan't guess that everything has gone wrong. The money that I brought down with me is almost spent. If the orange crop fails there is nothing for him and me to do but to jump into the lake!"

"Laurie!" he admonished indignantly.

"Don't you think you'd better wait till I address you frantically as—as Colin?" she asked, dashing the tears from her lashes, and laughing a little at this good opportunity of escape from tragedy.

Her speech had the apparent effect of transferring the tragedy from her possession to his, for he looked anything but mollified or entertained. Instead, he acted as if ready to wash his hands of the whole interview. His aghast realization of her probable future predicament, and a desire not to add to her troubles by complicating them with his own touchiness, combined to keep him patiently by her side, however, and induced him to investigate further, in the hopes of finding a way out.

"Miss Laurie, is it literally true that you—that you —well, put *all* your eggs into this one basket?" He staked the floating metaphor to the spot by pointing to the grove through the sorry avenue headed by the tree that so easily had given up its fruit.

"Literally true," she answered.

"Whatever made you!"

"I did it because I had so—so few eggs and no other basket," she answered, clinging forlornly to the tail of the kite-like metaphor.

His pointing arm fell to his side with eloquent helplessness.

"You think Mr. Selig is planning to ruin me?" she presently asked.

"I think it looks that way."

"What object could he have?"

"He lives by the ruin of others."

"He couldn't ruin you, though, even if he walked off with grove and furniture, could he? For you have another trade at your finger tips!"

She flipped this remark like a whiplash, making him tingle angrily, even though he did not yet know the point of her aim.

"Meaning——?" he hinted loftily.

"You could hire out any day as a Job's comforter!"

"My particular mission this morning is not of that —er—Scriptural character," he remarked suavely, "but to find out if you and your grandfather will do me the honor to dine with me on Christmas Day."

"I beg your pardon for being rude," she faltered. The dear word "Christmas" unlocked her heart, giving her natural gentleness a chance to step out and show itself. "You are very good. I suppose you guessed how lonely grandpa and I should have been by ourselves, though we have pretended that we shouldn't. Christmas is the one day in the year when we truly, truly need to be with our friends—that is why we shall be very happy to dine with *you*, Mr. Roycroft, and I—we—thank you."

He lifted his hat and bowed his grateful acknowledgment of her acceptance, but he disclaimed the motive ascribed to him.

"I fear I was thinking mostly of my own pleasure," he said. "Does it never strike you that I must be very lonely in my empty house?"

"No, it never does," she replied, shaking her head energetically. "You always have the air of being delightfully satisfied with yourself."

"Ah, reelly?" he inquired, parting immediately with his naturalness which had been very attractive while it lasted.

"Yes, reelly," she mimicked, smilingly. She was always ready to cope with him when he was skating upon his artificial ice pond. It was his sympathetic

sincerity she feared. *That* robbed her of her independence—made her feel feminine and limp—no way at all for a grove owner to feel when in the presence of another grove owner. "But to go back to Christmas—or rather to go forward four weeks—grandpa refuses to enter a canoe, as you know, and he can't swim, as perhaps you don't know, so how are we to get to that excitingly unknown quantity, your house?"

"I intend, of course, to send Peter with the carriage."

"The carriage?" she echoed, childishly rejoicing. "Sounds like mentioning 'the trolley' on a South Sea island! Whose carriage, I'd like to know!"

"Mine." He bit the word off short, never sure whether her artlessness was what it seemed or derision.

"If I owned a carriage *I'd* be good tempered," she stated criticizingly.

"Then God grant that you may some day own a carriage," was his fervent and parting remark.

As the days of the first winter month, so-called, rolled balmily on, the whole fair face of Florida brightened indescribably and her sleepy spirit waked to wonderful life. The roads that had been so dead and deserted during panting summer now creaked industriously from morning till night—and often during the night itself—with laden wagons of fruit. Tangerines, oranges, and grapefruit, either banded in packed boxes, or bulging from grove boxes, all hurried down the highways, trying their hardest to be first on the generous Christmas market. And the freezing north sent down its rich people, who filled the hotels and spread the styles; and it sent down its tourists and homeseekers who bought land and made Hunnerton Hopkins

forget that such a melancholy song as "Old Black Joe" was ever written.

"Wouldn't you like to visit a packing house, Miss McAllister?" he asked her, happening to be rattling past while she was interviewing the mail carrier. He drew his clay-spattered auto to a persuasive stop in front of her gate and patted its empty seat eloquently.

"I think I should," she said, suddenly aware that she had not been off her own acres for weeks. "I'm sure I should! Just wait till I finish this arrangement with—with——"

But nobody knew the mailman's name, and he himself never offered it, doubtless thinking that it was taught in the public schools along with the names of other great men of national renown.

"Den I'm to brung de cullud pahson's horse an' cart to-mo'w morning an' hitch 'em to yo' gate, lady?" he now asked.

"Yes, please," she answered.

The colored preacher being the only man in the state of Florida whose horse and cart were not busy, Laurie was gladly hiring them for her prospective journey to Bill Menefee's turpentine camp in search of those eminently desirable chunks of combustion misnamed "waste."

The negro guardian of the mail kicked his mule kindly and told it beseechingly to "Get along, Balaam," then remembered something very important about the parson's animal.

"De horse wat I brung yo to-mo'w, his name is 'Christianity,' lady," he said.

"That's no name for a horse," said its hirer, spiritually disturbed.

"No, genellay speakin', it ain't," agreed the old man

politely, "but it fits de pahson's lak a shoe, for de minute yo' hol' de whup over dat horse he lope along at a mighty fine pace; but when yo' put de whup back in de whup-socket dat horse stop so short he mos' jerk yo' off de front seat."

"Thank you for the information," said Laurie, "but does it mean that I'm never to take the whip out, or never to put it back?"

"If yo' needs to *reach* somewheres," he said carefully, "yo' hol's de whup over Christianity till yo' drap. Get along, Balaam!"

"This is the 'Christianity' for *me*," observed Mr. Hopkins, patting his tin machine's hood when he jumped out to crank up after the mailman's departure had given him the road. "Gasoline's the gospel these days. No, don't get in there, Miss McAllister," he said, checking her occupancy of the tonneau, "sit in front. Now the hauling's begun on the roads there's such chucks in them that the chap on the hind seat don't touch the cushions more'n once in a couple of miles."

With that they started, and truly the way that light-spirited little auto tripped and skidded was a sight to see and something to feel. It was on its honor to kick up more dust than any other car in the state, and when it gamboled past farmhouses it shed squawking but unharmed hens from its tires as a pinwheel sheds sparks.

"Fondness for animals is a trait of these Fodes," said Mr. Hopkins, just managing by a twist of the steering-wheel to save the life of a flustered pig.

Thwarted of its pig, the Fode tried to leap into a ditch. Hopkins restrained it by whispering into its ear something pointedly private.

"I wonder—how people—with false teeth—manage

to ride—in one of these things!" marveled Laurie, who had shed hairpins and sidecombs and everything else of a detachable nature.

"Same as they eat beefsteak, I reckon," replied Mr. Hopkins, vastly pleased with the fantasy. "By pretending they don't care for it, or they'd lose 'em sure."

When the packing house was reached it proved to be an ugly zinc building of vast proportions, like a bare barn or empty armory, with a wagon track passing a huge door on its south side and a spur track of the railroad passing a huge door on its north side. This latter track held several refrigerator cars, and, grinding through the dusty ruts of the former, there tirelessly passed the loaded wagons from neighboring groves, pausing only long enough to empty their golden globes into the mysteries of the interior.

When admitted into those mysteries, Laurie watched spellbound the magic process whereby the oranges of Florida practically dance of themselves from their groves to the produce markets of far cities, almost without touch of human hand.

Mr. Hopkins piloted her from one danger zone to another, kindly furnishing instructive data to which she listened not at all, being too busy watching the constantly moving fruits. The place typified oranges on a spree—oranges bobbing around in a vat of water; oranges swimming and ducking about in this dirty bath until caught in a mesh of brushes to receive a willy-nilly scrubbing; oranges, clean but dripping, being pushed by these brushes to an endless belt and by the belt being remorselessly carried into a blast furnace by way of its front door; oranges, dry and warm, coming out of the back door; oranges traveling meekly; oranges fighting and twisting and trying to

leap off the belt; no oranges escaping; oranges then getting purposely spilled from the belt to a cascading slope of clean brushes whose business was to polish; oranges skipping and bouncing from the assault of the bristles until finally escaping to the false security of a wooden shelf—very false security, for the shelf itself moved constantly forward, first in a main artery, then ramifying into four arteries, all moving, moving, moving, and carrying the fruit with them to the separate Gehennas of sorters and sizers and wrappers and packers.

Three young girls were stationed on a high platform in front of the main artery. Their occupation was no sinecure. As the staggering, swaggering fruit swept by them the girls worked so quickly and incessantly with muscle and brain that it is a wonder both did not snap with the tension. Just imagine an orange whizzing impudently by you and it being your job to decide properly in that blur of a minute whether the orange was a flawless A-grade, entitled to being shoved to the first-class shelf; or a medium B-grade, belonging to the second-class shelf; or an inferior C-grade, fit only for the steerage; or a scallawag "cull," unfit to go anywhere at any price unless perchance it sneaked through on the bumpers.

But these girls did it, and as the fruit flew by them their fingers flew quicker, sending each yellow passenger spinning into its proper train. At the far end of the building the trains disappeared down slots, sending the passengers tumbling to their respective stations. Arrived, the oranges wandered dazedly down an incline, and sized themselves by falling through holes, wobbling giddily into hoppers, and subsiding into the comparative peace of immense bins.

But here they were fallen upon by scores of wrappers, stalwart young men, working against time, as everyone works in a packing house, who grabbed them up, swaddled them in tissue paper, and packed them in a crate. This packing was done with such geometrical accuracy that the fruit could and did travel a thousand miles without shifting the thousandth of an inch, and done with such twinkling rapidity that the whole crate was filled in the actual time that it would take a tyro to swaddle a single orange. This Mr. Hopkins proved by his watch which he held open in his hand, inciting the stalwart young men to smiling but grim rivalry.

After being bulgingly filled, the open crates were shoved to other stalwart youths who nailed lids to them, banded them twice with heavy wire, and pushed them aside completely finished before you yourself could have picked up a hammer and a nail.

Evidently the first requirement about the packing house was speed, and the second requirement was more speed. No hammerer was allowed to waste time in picking up a handful of nails. Such a careless practice would of course result in nails being picked up with heads to points and vice versa, necessitating an awful squandering of moments while the workman turned them right side up. So he was furnished with a "stripper," which is a machine in the shape of a huge gridiron, upon whose bars the nails are poured and between which they dangle pathetically, caught by the heads. The hammerer had nothing to do but to snatch them out and drive them in.

Away up near the roof was another partial platform where one man made boxes so quickly that he could keep three men busy filling them. To Laurie he

seemed to make these boxes by baking them in an oven. Into the oven he slid five slabs of wood, then he pressed a lever with his foot, and the finished box hopped out from a rear door, some fifty odd nails having been driven into it by the one pressure.

Below, on the main floor, crates on trucks journeyed, apparently of themselves, into waiting refrigerator cars.

"It's magic. I never saw quicker work in my life," Laurie gasped in weak epitome of the wonderful whole.

"And your little girl friend in the middle earns more than the other two put together," commented Mr. Hopkins, his eyes happening to be upon the sorters.

" 'Little girl friend in the middle'?" she asked, looking around for an explanation of this rebus. Chancing to glance at the raised platform where the three young girls were madly working she found it. "Why, Osceola Carter!" she cried yearningly. She had not realized how terribly she *had* missed the discontented, pretty little cracker, until thus suddenly seeing her.

Hearing the voice even through the grunt of the blast furnace, the purr of the belt, and the swish of tissue paper, Osceola peeped down from her conspicuous eminence, then she reddened and smiled constrainedly. Next she was forced to reach out hurriedly to sidetrack a spotted tramp-orange that hoped it had hopped gayly by as an A.

Plainly this was no time for a resumption of either friendship or hostility, and Laurie was obliged to go home without being able to discover exactly how matters now stood between them. She only saw that Osceola was trimmer and pinker than ever, and was working like a Trojan in a place where editions of Gray's "Elegy" and "Locksley Hall" would be welcomed merely as food for the blast furnace.

CHAPTER XIV

ON the morrow, true to his faithful black promise, Balaam's master brought Christianity on a towline behind him.

Christianity was a beast with so many welts on him that he looked like a raised map. He was hitched to a finely rattling farm wagon, the hitching being mostly rope.

"Contribution plate must have been empty for months," advanced Laurie, who, hatted and gloved for her adventurous ride, was down at her gate to meet the outfit.

"Dat's so," said the mailman, shaking his head in sorry retrospect. "De pahson preached a summon las' fall entitle 'De angels callin' de buzzards to supper.'"

"I'd like to have heard it."

"Not if yo'd been one o' de buzzards. Pahson he describe de buzzards so perfect dat all de angels in de congregation reckonized 'em, an' dere's been trouble ever since. For buzzards mostly has de money."

"Now about the turpentine camp—can you direct me?"

"Yo' want Mr. Tandy's or turrer gel'man?"

"Turrer gel'man," she chose promptly.

"Well, lady, yo' drive back a 'siderable piece o' road 'twill yo' come to de sulphur spring, den yo' turns off to de lef'-hand side an' keeps on a-goin'."

"But how do I know when I come to the sulphur spring?" she asked, clambering into the wagon.

"Yo' knows it by de mighty specifyin' combinement o' color an' smell," he answered. "De color's yellow an' locates itse'f at de hole whar de watter comes out, an' de smell 'pears to be *all* colors an' don' locate to no one spot but perambulates around wide."

"Doesn't sound as if I could miss it," she said, turning Christianity with difficulty. Having come so far with Balaam, he hated to say good-by to that moth-eaten guide.

After being turned, however, he realized that he was headed back home and he hit out beautifully. His gait was a peculiar one and appeared to be the result of a single-minded desire to cast all four legs from him and be done with them. But it covered the ground very acceptably, at least to the sulphur spring.

Wrinkling her nose to shut out some of the smell of all colors, Laurie drove to the left as directed, in peaceful ignorance of the fact that the mail carrier had described the turn from a coming point of view instead of a going, and that she was on the wrong road, traveling farther and farther from the "turrer gel'-man" with every revolution of the iron-banded wheels.

Nor did Christianity revolve those wheels as heretofore. When he made the discovery that his stall was not to be his immediate haven, he lost heart and speed, and commenced to walk with the melancholy, high-stepping, disjointed slow dignity of a camel.

She let him. The day was a lovely one, and an outing in a cart is not the despicable affair it may sound to the wealthy. An automobile obliterates scenery by hopping right over it. A person who rides in a buggy might as well travel in a coffin for all the view that's

obtainable. But one who rides on a wagon seat sees all—the far sky, the near earth, and the beautiful lands of fancy that lie between.

And to be able to look down upon the back of such a thin horse as Christianity was instructive as a whole course in anatomy. After every deep stretch of sand Christianity would rest himself by smelling his knees for five minutes. In any other horse but a parson's horse it would have been called balking.

To the present driver these rests were as pleasant as was the journeying, for they gave her many a glimpse of wood life that she otherwise would have missed. During one of them she witnessed a fight between two of Mrs. Carter's "gophers." These mandolin-shaped warriors stood up on their hind legs, drew in their heads, and ferociously clashed their shells together. The tortoises manufactured a terrifying amount of noise, but no more damage was done than if two kitchen frying pans had bumped, and at the conclusion of the combat neither party seemed to miss it: they both crawled on their way apparently arm in arm.

During another knee-smelling period Laurie first heard and then saw a full-grown alligator. He was taking one of his floundering land-trips from lake to lake, and was a great deal more disturbed by her than she by him. Wheeling with the agility of a lizard, he went back the way he had come, and tumbled into the first swamp that would hide him.

His appearance, though brief, was of benefit, for it started Christianity off on a much-needed spurt. Even without these entertaining wild beasts the woods would have been lively enough. Once a mother skunk with a charming family of kittens crossed the path, a skulking weasel ran in and out of a fallen log, and the birds

were legion. Mourning doves in faithful pairs strutted on all sides, emitting their soul-harrowing "Oh-oo! oh-oo!" The shy crested cardinals, red as poppies, played like flames among the trees, singing sweetly as canaries. The butcher birds, in their executioner's black caps, caught grasshoppers and then carried them to the top of a dead stump—already filled with gruesome remains—to dissect them. Lurid-minded scientists love to assert that the butcher bird impales his feathered brothers alive on thorns, but, dollars to doughnuts, most of the luckless victims have impaled themselves.

All this was very pleasant and semitropical, but it wasn't turpentine, and in time she decided that she had better attach a little importance to the fact that she did not know where she was. But there are certain roads in Florida where wayfarers are not to be had for the wishing, and where lost souls therefore have to stay lost for longer than is altogether comfortable. It was well past midday before the girl met a fellow traveler to set her on the right road. He was a freckled little boy with sun-bleached hair and ferrety eyes, but with decision of character.

"You must be crazy," he stated unreservedly when she asked him if she was headed for the still.

He unceremoniously turned Christianity right about face, then clambered unasked into the seat and appropriated the reins.

"Gup," he observed with the majestic satisfaction of all male things who have succeeded in wresting authority from the female of the species.

And Christianity gupped beautifully, evidently having respect for a ferrety-eyed boy, and none at all for a big-eyed girl.

At the first crossroad the boy abdicated.

"Push on till you come to a railroad track, cross over the track, and there you are," he said, after having dismounted by the simple process of jumping over the moving wheel.

So down this new road she obediently jogged, and in due time had the comfort of really finding the track, which was a rusty railed curiosity bearing no marks of ever being used. At one time there had been set up, on a four-armed slanting cross of wood, the usual warning, "Rail-road Cros-sing!" the two words bisecting each other obliquely. Of this warning three syllables had rotted and fallen off, leaving merely an upward-pointing cheerful command of "Sing!"

"With pleasure," agreed Laurie promptly. She therefore rattled over the track, caroling the first song that came to mind, an inspiring but undignified melody from her days of boyhood, of which days every true girl owns several:

"Landlord, fill the flowing bowl
Until it does run over!
Landlord, fill the flowing bowl
Until it does run over!
For tonight we'll merry, merry be,
For tonight we'll merry, merry be,
For tonight we'll merry, merry *be—e!*
Tomorrow we'll be sober!"

The lively college glee first filled the forest with feminine *diablerie*, and then waked it to astounding masculine echo. For no sooner had the last word died on the distance, than there arose an answering male chorus of perfect, four-part melody, coming as pat as if it had been rehearsed for weeks for that particular occasion.

This echo swept through the pines like a choral from a grand organ:

"For tonight we'll merry, merry be,
For tonight we'll merry, merry be,
For tonight we'll merry, merry *be—e!*
Tomorrow we'll be sober!"

Waked to his best endeavor, Christianity galloped into the turpentine camp so dashingly that two or three men thought it necessary to grab him by the bridle to stop him.

Small surprise that the chorus had been a grand one, for the singers were about twenty strong—rough men who needed washing, and needed shaving, and needed haircuts, but who did not need to be instructed what to do when a girl flung them the keynote. They had been interrupted in the business of preparing dinner, and many of them stood about with cups and pans still in their stayed hands. Just now song seemed to be their need instead of food.

"Start up another!" several shouted in unison.

"I did not expect to be heard," she stammered, smiling. "I have come to find out if you have some barrels of waste to sell."

This question caused a silence followed by an outburst of loud laughter, a coarse, good-natured gulf of sound out of which they rescued themselves only to fall noisily in again.

Finally, in answer to her blank look of wonder, one of the men said, "We can't help being amused by you, miss. One day you blaze away at us with your six-shooter, and now you come singing to buy something!"

"Did I blaze away at *you*?" she asked uneasily.

"Maybe I've made a mistake. I thought I—who is in charge here?"

"Say, boss," the man called over his shoulder to someone, "you're wanted by—by little Miss Dead-Shot."

The group of men separated, making an avenue at the end of which stood Calhoun Tandy, a half head taller than the tallest of his followers. He was in his usual costume of overalls and open shirt, but in concession to the month he wore a homespun woolen shawl across his shoulders. And this nondescript bit of attire was carried with superb masculinity, robbing it of every vestige of womanly association. Rather, it added to his manhood, as his plaid to a Highland chief—his Navajo blanket to the Indian brave.

"Take out Miss McAllister's horse and give him a rub down and a feed," he ordered, slouching slowly to the cart. "You get down, Laurie McAllister, and eat dinner," he concluded, in the same tone of masterful order.

"I can't get out," she said, advancing this fact both as a social theory and an actual condition, for a visit was not in order and the cart was high.

He disposed of the two objections by lifting her bodily to the ground. Christianity was already free from the harness and was being currycombed with fistfuls of moss which hung conveniently from every branch.

Two men fixed a seat of honor for the visitor—they put a folded coat on a plank upheld by kegs.

"Thank you, but I can't stay, I really can't," she stated nervously.

"Oh, yes, you can," said the host deeply, settling it. "And you'll take dinner. Up to Georgy no visitor

who comes at meal-time is sent away, or—kept outside on the steps."

He continued to point to the seat until she sank slowly into it.

"I didn't know I was coming here," she said. "I asked the way to the other camp."

"If you-uns is hyar by accidental happen," he drawled, dropping into dialect, "hit's all the more up to we-uns to make you sorry you didn't come a-puppose—that's Georgy ways."

"It's Floridy's ways, too," claimed a loyal son, putting fried fish on the table.

That table was an alfresco affair of pine boards, and it was already stacked with dishes and food, both of a sorry appearance, but the latter smelling extraordinarily good.

The camp itself was not extensive, a few frame shacks constituting its residential quarter. The rest was given over to the still, which at a little distance steamed, and boiled, and trickled forth streams of dirty warm water, and breathed the air full of a volatile, smarting oil. The building itself was just a huge condensing tub on stilts, incrusted with blackened resin, and rich with all the pungent odors of "dip" and "scrape." "Dip" was the liquid flow from the trees, and "scrape" was the hardened scab. "Waste"—the object of Laurie's visit—was the inflammable residuum obtained by straining liquid resin through cotton batting. The saturated cotton soon hardens to rock that can be chipped into bits with an ax, and a match applied to the rock results in a blaze that is as enveloping as spontaneous combustion. From the still several inclined gangways ran down to a raised platform built close to the railroad track. Barrels of

turpentine stood waiting for the train—a long, lazy wait lasting through many suns and rains.

Closer at hand, the ways of the men who did the cooking were fully as novel to the visitor as was the still itself. To boil coffee over an open fire in a land where there is not a stone to be procured for love or money is quite an art, requiring a good deal of fancy balancing of the coffeepot on green sticks.

"We *did* have a gasoline stove," observed the balancer, wiping sweat from his forehead, "but a damfool blew it up."

Extreme consciousness on the part of an individual in a green cardigan jacket, the rest of him being mostly bandages, proved conclusively who the blower was.

"Didn't I blow myself up too?" he asked in an aggrieved tone.

"Not far enough," said the coffee-boiler bitterly.

From another fire of glowing cinders a long-armed, hairy gorilla of a *chef* removed a number of hot clay mummies that turned out to be roast quail. The birds, feathers and all, had been wrapped in mud and covered with wood coals until done. The gorilla then took up two dippers' trowels and prepared the cooked delicacy for the table by prying off the mud, with which the charred feathers and the skin went too, leaving a juicy mouthful "not to be sneezed at," as he earnestly put it.

The fish was also perfection of its kind, being a fat steak cut from the spine of a large bass, and owning no more bones than an oyster. Of the plentiful "bread" the best to be said was silence, for it was a baking-powder atrocity fried—literally fried—in frying pans. It was more bowlder than bread. Evidently the way to eat it was to lodge it chokingly in your throat

and trust to the coffee washing it down before you died.

The coffee was bitter and black; this, to the turpentiners, meant that the coffee was good. The combined smells of the spread furnished an invitation too pressing to be resisted, and the girl visitor was soon eating heartily, spurred thereunto by artless vanity as much as by hunger, for she could not fail but see that her presence was considered the biggest treat of the feast. The men could not press enough upon her. Profanity and even obscenity rolled around, but merited the treatment she accorded it of refusing to hear, for it rolled around of itself as the result of force of habit, and on this occasion was really an evidence of reverence under too high pressure.

The dining chairs were pine stumps sawed off and set up on end. They were comfortable as long as you remained sitting, but when you got up to go you took away a part of your seat, and your seat retained a part of you; the stickiness of pine sap is hard to kill.

Cal Tandy, hatless, and with his lock of jet black hair dangling into one eye, sat beside his guest and treated her with the solid silence that a really good meal entails, but he kept her cup and plate faithfully filled.

"I have really enjoyed the dinner," she told him, timidly, when the repast had vanished and nothing but empty tins remained the whole length of the board.

Her remark being conventional, he made no reply to it, but the bandaged man in the green jacket took wheedling heed.

"Then would you be willing to pay—in something?" he asked, having been put up to it by his comrades who were now nudgingly furnishing him with courage.

"Depends upon whether I've brought the something with me," she answered, smilingly wondering what it could be.

"You've brought it all right all right," said the green one, relieved. "We want you to sing for us."

"If I can get my voice out from under all the quail and fish," she promised dubiously.

This time she sang "Loch Lomond," rather regretting the selection as she proceeded, seeing that its plaintive sorrow gripped her impressionable hearers like a personal grief. Still sitting upon the folded coat, with her hands clasped in her lap, and her thoughtful eyes fixed upon the pine-tree background, she sang the song clearly and sweetly. When she made the harrowing admission that she and her true love would never meet again on the bonny, bonny banks of Loch Lomond, more than one half-smoked pipe went out for lack of application, and was held respectfully idle upon a knee. Throughout the whole she felt Tandy's eyes upon her face, and when she came to the lines,

> "You tak the high road,
> And I'll tak the low road,
> But I'll be in Scotland afore you,"

she noticed that his hand, which hung by his side, clenched as if a pain had gone through him.

At its finish the song received solemn applause.

"French Jack knows a lulu, too," observed the destroyer of the gasoline stove. "Spit it out, Frenchie."

Needing no further urging, French Jack—who was the gorilla—took off his hat, held it in both hands between his knees, and sang into it as into a shabby dictograph, never once lifting his gaze from the greasy lining.

French Jack's ballad was really a detailed biography in some thirty stanzas, beginning,

"He'd been a happy, blue-eyed boy
Had Trusty Jim, with curling hair,
Until he loved, without alloy,
A girl who didn't treat him square."

The strong inference was that if Trusty Jim had mixed his love with alloy his hair might have kept on curling, but neither the warbler nor his male hearers caught this inference. To all the story was a mournful gem claiming their most melancholy attention.

The song went on to describe the unsquare maiden's misdoings with a great deal of frankness, calling a spade a spade wherever that immoral implement had to be mentioned, and proving to everybody's intellect how utterly necessary it was for Trusty Jim to put a shot through her, as he did in the next to the last verse, the whole concluding with,

"All pale she lay in front of him;
No longer could she smile or stir;
'I'll follow you to hell,' said Jim,
Then fired and fell dead top of her."

"That was—was wonderful," said Laurie, when the silence really had to be broken one way or another. "I never heard anything like it. Thank you. But now I must be going. May I have the barrels of waste?"

Several men scrambled to get it for her, then wisely bethought themselves to obtain the sanction, or the nonsanction, of the boss. They looked at him, waitingly.

Tandy in turn looked at the prospective buyer.

"How much did he tell you to get?" he asked evenly, but his hand clenched again.

"'He'?" she echoed, glancing around her at the accumulated he's.

Tandy cut them all out with a gesture.

"That man who rides the bay mare up you-uns' way," he said, "that man Roycroft. He who life started out on the 'high road,' and yet put others of us on the 'low road,' an' expecks us all to reach the same place!"

"I want three barrels," she said, meeting his hot glance with an extremely cold one. "I can't pay for any more."

Tandy nodded to the waiting men.

"Hitch up the horse," he said, "and put the barrels in the wagon."

This was done in very short order, but the green cardigan jacket was being unmercifully nudged again, and he finally took the desired request to headquarters.

"Miss, we want to know if you've brought your little popper with you," he said anxiously.

"This?" she asked, getting the idea at last and drawing her six-shooter.

A howl of general delight greeted its appearance.

"Listen here, miss," began the green jacket excitedly, "we never see a girl shoot like you in our lives, and we'd love to witness another scrap of some sort."

"I am quite ready," she answered. It never took much to stir the joyous sporting blood in her veins. "Set up your target, then bring out the best shot you've got and I'll challenge him to a match."

Another yell of delight went up and caps were waved.

"Wot's the stakes?" asked a thick voice earnestly. "Thar's no fun jes' goin' zin! zowee! zap! for nothin'."

"Not a bit of fun," she seconded gravely. "I might as well win something while I'm about it."

The men confabbed together, apparently taking up a collection, for they went down into their pockets. Then their spokesman stated their proposition.

"If you win we pay for the turpentine waste—nine dollars—if you lose—now it's your turn to say."

"Have I anything with me that's worth nine dollars?" she mused.

"A kiss," decided the gorilla, who evidently was sentiment personified.

"Thank you, captain," she said, giving him a soldier's salute. "That was very prettily said. Far be it from me to cheapen your compliment by refusing. A kiss—if you can win it. Who's going to shoot against me? You?"

French Jack shook his head very sadly.

"I couldn't shoot a steeple off a church," he admitted with pain.

The men held another confab, all of them but Calhoun Tandy, who with arms dangling idly by his sides was leaning against a tree, apparently taking no interest in the new turn of events.

The spokesman again approached the champion.

"We've picked our shot," he told her. "And he's a lulu," he assured her impressively. "A lulu. If he had a piece of lead small enough—small enough, mind you—he could shoot an eye through the point of a needle."

"Who is he?" she asked. Then, interestedly, "Now what are you doing?"

"Drawing the scratch," replied someone. The men were managing to get a great deal of fun out of the

whole affair and were squabbling together like the boys they had suddenly become, asking each other such important questions as "What are you hollerin' about, anyhow?" or "Who's a-doin' this, anyway?".

She had a democratic feeling of being one of them, much as she had felt when a popular little girl in a crowded schoolyard at recess; whether playmates were boys or girls made very little difference so long as they were fair. At school, grammar had been of importance only at the end of the month when reports were sent home; none at all in the middle. Very often a boy who "ain't gotted" was a far livelier companion than a boy who "did not have." She unconsciously reflected the same tolerant spirit here and did not clamor for grammar when there was good-comradeship to be had. Though grammar was not an utterly unknown quality among the turpentiners. True, most of them spoke in the slurring idiom of the easy-going Gulf States; some in the whine of the parched southwest; some in the twang of the hustling east; but a few had a refinement of speech that marked them as the product of that fine obliterator of federal boundaries—education. She was amused to note the many local variations of the pronoun in the second person plural, her listening ear catching the "yo'-all" and "you-all" of darkydom, the "you-uns" and "ye-uns" of the southern mountains, and even the high-pitched belligerent "youse" of the streets of the city of her heart. What these men were all doing here, in coats of every hue, and caps in all stages of disrepute, was the private affair of each, and had nothing whatever to do with the drawing of a scratch-line upon the Florida sand.

She surveyed the line with pride. This was something like.

"Is this the way you fix things for men—when they shoot?" she asked.

"Nope, miss, dis is de way we fix 'em for a kid," answered a genial soul before stopping to think.

"I wanted to be treated like a man," she complained. "I'm going to shoot like a man, and be fair like a man. And I want the target to be a playing card tacked up to a tree—the way I've read about. Yes, that's just about the right distance," she ended pacifically, seeing that a pack of cards had been produced and a tree selected as quick as she could mention them. "Tack up the ace of spades."

"Make it the ace of hearts," said Calhoun Tandy authoritatively, and it was done without question. The boss was boss.

His voice almost made her jump, she had so nearly forgotten him, owing to his statuesque withdrawal from the general hilarity.

"All set," announced the master of ceremonies.

So the men widened out, leaving Laurie in the center, toeing the despised "scratch."

"Trot out your man," she ordered after an experimental sight or two to prove to herself that her muscles were steady and her nerves calm.

"Consider him trotted," drawled Tandy, still leaning slouchily against his tree that was well in the rear of her. "I'll pop from hyar. Shootin's something I can do as well from way off as plum on the line. Start any time you-uns feels ready."

"Him?" she asked, upset without being able to tell why. She addressed herself to the man in the green jacket.

"Sure," he answered. "Didn't we *tell* you he was a lulu? The boss has got us all skinned a mile."

"Well, he hasn't got me skinned a mile," she decided, "*yet*."

Tandy glanced quickly backward over his shoulder —the characteristic gesture with which he always tried to hide a smile that had caught him unawares. When he faced the target again he was indifferent as usual.

"You take the first shot," she said, "I the second, and so on. Then I'll have some idea of what I'm shooting against. And"—she gave the caution maternally and fairly—"put your hair out of your eye, so you can see."

"See?" hissed a thrilled observer on the edge of the crowd. "He don't need to see, miss. He can shoot with both eyes shut, *I* think."

Without obeying the maternal advice Tandy raised his arm lazily and fired.

She looked keenly at the target. Its white surface was unmarked.

"Never touched it," she said, feeling cheered. "Even if I can't beat it I can't do worse, and that's a comfort."

Again Tandy turned away his head spasmodically, and the men broke into a disconcerting burst of laughter.

"Hold off a minute," said the green jacket man, waving a bandaged arm to halt her fire.

He then went to the card and put a swaddled thumb on the heart, calling attention to its plugged condition.

"In order not to 'do worse,' miss, you'll have to hit his ball spang on the head."

"Get out of the way and I'll try," she said. " 'What man has done, man can do.' "

With a queer life or death feeling of responsibility, a sensation that she had never before attached to the ceremony, she fired.

Still was the white surface of the ace of hearts unmarred.

"Have I struck the spot?" she asked excitedly.

Green Cardigan's thumb-rag traveled rather regretfully to a fresh pink scar in the bark of the brown pine.

"Only this spot, miss."

Then he moved out of the way for the next shot of "the boss."

"My balls can't a-bear bein' hit spang on the head, even by me," he murmured, while raising his firing arm. "So I'll go below."

With his last word the report rang out and the perfect outline of the heart was marred, as if it had shed a drop of blood.

The crowd was silent. They admired the boss, but they wanted the girl to have a show, and the likelihood now seemed uncertain.

"I can't afford to miss again," she said, squinting her eyes to aim. "I need the prize. Three barrels of waste are three barrels of waste."

Her shot made another pink scar on the edge of the pine.

"And a kiss is a kiss," drawled her opponent, adding a second drop of blood to the first.

His remark brought home to her her first actual realization of the other side of the bargain. And the affair —from being a harmless frolic—turned into something unmaidenly, horrible, disgraceful. She asked herself why, *why* had the escapade not been thus incredibly vulgar when she had laughingly agreed to it? By what secret of individuality did this Georgia mountaineer

manage to turn vaudeville into a life drama every time he stepped upon a scene?

In addition to her mental embarrassment her third shot was complicated by that indescribable and often incurable palsy of the nerves that falls upon a fine marksman who has unaccountably missed fire at a time when others are waiting for him to make good. Shaken and actually frightened by the loss of her former clever potency, she registered a third shot that was wilder than the previous two.

She waited tensely for Tandy's fourth, and when it did not come she turned upon him nervously.

"Well! why don't you shoot?" she asked.

"Don't calc'late to have to," he explained, his magnificent indolence being wholly unassumed. "You-uns'll be 'bliged to unload into the heart pretty lively to make a score."

She raised and lowered her shaking arm several times before daring to pull the trigger. She was terrified to remember the days of her ignorance, when she had been so dangerously free with deadly powder and shot. Before, she had thought that a bullet *had* to go where it was meant to go. Now she saw that a bullet, like a poet, was subject to distressing flights of fancy. Why, she might have killed Tandy while shooting at his knife. She might have killed Roycroft. She might have missed the rattlesnake. Her whole security was wrested from her.

When at last she fired, the random lead went whining into space, not even nicking the tree. Tandy retired his gun into his hip pocket and leaned back more comfortably. He shook the lock of hair from his eyes, folded his arms, and surveyed the loser.

"Pay your forfeit, miss, pay your forfeit," said the

audience, entertainedly making a circle around the two principals.

Imbued from her youth up with the stern importance of obeying the rules of a game, she made a slow step towards the victor, but this time she knew that she was going to be a coward and a cheat. She was no longer a child in a schoolyard playing with boys. The kiss had changed appallingly, too. Fifteen minutes ago it had been merely the careless thing she dropped upon a flower, upon the soft skin of a child, upon the white hair of old age. Now it was charged with overwhelming significance.

"Cal," she said, "I can't."

"Sure you can't," he agreed, laughing. "'Cause you're a woman and no woman plays fair."

"I did play fair!" she claimed.

"Payin's part of the play," he pointed out. "You shot square, but you shot to win. That's all O.K.—so did I. But next time you pretend to be a man, a square one, take heed that you don't bet something you can't pay. That's all. I want everything that's hard to get, but don't never want nothin' that's grudged me."

Seeing that the promised entertainment was off, the men widened out.

"But now that you can't shoot, miss, wot cher goin' to do when you gits into trouble?" asked a highly amused voice.

"Ask Cal Tandy to do my shooting for me," she answered immediately.

To her surprise she noted the slight scorn in his dark eyes die out in a misty blur that was shockingly like the moisture of tears.

"Do you mean that, Laurie McAllister?" he asked.

"Why—well—yes," she faltered. "Yes."

"You'll never have to ask twice," he promised. "You've paid me. We're quits."

Assisted by twenty ushers, she mounted her cart seat and grasped the reins.

"Tell me how to get home," she asked affably. "I came by way of the sulphur spring, and each person who told me the road put me on a new turning. By now I don't know where I am."

"I don't believe you do," said the gorilla, in his most musical tone. "The sulphur spring is miles out of your way."

"Bring the mule," commanded Tandy.

It was brought and he straddled it bare-backed, his shawl still on his shoulders, his long legs almost touching the ground. But as a safe escort he owned certain formidable points of skill and courtesy that would have given Sir Galahad—if met—the tussle of his white young life.

"I'll put her on the high road," he said.

"And take the forfeit there?" mused the ever sentimental gorilla.

Tandy slapped his pistol pocket and eyed his lady.

"Want me to begin on him?" he asked.

"No," she answered, laughing. "They are all my friends and I don't want any of them killed off. Good-by, boys."

They locked arms and warbled "For She's a Jolly Good Fellow" till she and Sir Gareth were well out of sight.

With the dying away of the music there fell a complete silence between the travelers. Calhoun might be, and was, a magnificent safeguard, but he was noticeably poor company, parting with the fewest possible words,

and parting with them mostly one at a time, always by way of curt instruction—"Easy," "Right," "Left," "Duck," "Watch out," "Come on."

In between these puffs of speech taciturnity reigned. He led the way on his mule, giving Christianity nothing to do but to smell the mule's tail and follow.

Her only task being to hold the useless reins, Laurie had plenty of time in which to ruminate upon her dumb cavalier, and sincerely to admire his mule, which was not the dun-colored, moth-eaten, tubercular bag-of-bones that Balaam was, but a clean, white beast with good lines, worth possibly as much as two horses. In sandy, panting Florida, a man with no ambitions and a good mule can go considerably further than a man with good ambitions and no mule.

She tried to keep her mind on the mule, but her thoughts persisted in wandering to its rider, who read the roads and forests better than a scholar reads his books, and who successfully followed trails that in many instances were not much more than hog-tracks, half the time under swamp water, too. She began to see how a girl like Osceola could love him and be happy married to him, for she now had proof that he could "boss" himself as well as others, that he scored the blows of Fate against Fate herself, and did not try to get even with that inscrutable lady's agents. His recent hot mention of Roycroft had been tinged with the bitterness of sorrow, not of hate. Osceola's meek tactics, expressed in her remark that she only wanted to caress his lock of black hair out of his eyes and kiss him, would be the right ones to tame him and to hold him. Had he not himself said that he would never hurt a li'l cat that had come to him to fall asleep?

On they went, past bogs of cypress upon whose protruding "knees" were generally perched long-legged birds or short-legged turtles, these last always hurtling back into the scummy water with a splash; past dryer thickets red with a berry that the natives called "holly," though it was not holly in the least; through arid stretches of dead sand white as salt, whose breath was hot as the breath from a blast furnace, and where nothing grew but the easily satisfied palmetto-scrub whose leaves were frayed as hotel fans at the end of the summer season; through spring-fed spots of green where wild honeysuckle matted and bloomed, throttling disgusted-looking pin oaks half to death, but forming fragrant coverts for the bluebirds and cardinals.

Laurie feared that she herself did not make a picture to meet the romantic requirements of the floral surroundings and pregnant silence. One cannot rattle around on the high, hard seat of a lurching farm-wagon and feel properly dignified. And to have three dirty barrels of turpentine waste stacked up behind one does not improve matters. On the whole, she was rather relieved when the trail eventually angled them out upon the main road at a point hearteningly familiar to her, where her own lake was pleasantly and beckoningly visible.

And yet with that relief was mixed a premonition of final parting that closely resembled regret.

Calhoun checked his mule, letting Christianity pass him till he and Laurie were side by side. Having no tail to point the way, Christianity naturally stopped.

"Yonder's you-all's home, Miss McAllister," said Tandy, briefly.

Never before had he addressed her with the formality of "Miss," having always drawlingly Laurie-d her

from the beginning. The improvement came so late as to be almost unwelcome.

Miss McAllister slid to the edge of the seat that brought her nearest to him and extended her hand.

"Good-by and thank you," she said.

The hand that she had expected to clasp hers, even gladly, remained motionless on the neck of the mule.

"Why, I thought you'd forgiven me," she faltered, slowly withdrawing her offered member and letting it drop limply in her lap.

"For what?" he asked, his dark eyes gleaming coldly from under the darker lock of hair.

"That's so," she said hardily, "you haven't anything to forgive me, have you? Well, then, why didn't you shake hands?"

"When I'm through I'm through," he explained somberly.

"So'm I," she promptly adduced in denial of some vague blame that he seemed to be fastening upon her.

"With a man, the on'y way to be through is *all* through," he said, "not holdin' a hand that he knows ain't his to keep."

"Still, we may be friends, mayn't we?"

"I hope not."

"You hope not?"

"Them sort of friends don't work out to no good. Not but what I've seen it tried—up to Georgy. An', seein', I learned what I told you once—that woman's pity is brutaler even than man's kindness."

He jerked his mule around and left her.

CHAPTER XV

A FEW days and the inflammable waste was tucked away in the center of the hundred or more funeral pyres in the grove, ready for the match at any time, to be sure, but representing a shadow of a calamity whichever way the harassed girl owner happened to look at it. For if it proved unnecessary then had nine colossal dollars been expended needlessly, and if it came to be used, a freeze would come at the same time. A freeze would mean swift ruin, not a ruin merely of the present, out of which one might hope to extricate oneself in time and build anew, but a ruin as complete as that made by fire and flood—a sweeping away of everything, a complete annihilation of resources and resourcefulness.

Laurie found herself daily watching the grove with the apprehension of a mother hanging over the cradle of a baby threatened by death. Each orange that fell to the ground in its apparent prime, bruised and bumped her anxious heart in its descent. And, creeping nearer and nearer, there approached the day upon which she would have to pay her paltry debt to Selig. Its paltriness was what made it so horrible, but the debt might as well be a million dollars as a hundred. Under the circumstances one was as impossible to raise as the other.

"And where are the profits of an industry into which I have to put a hundred dollars before I can take a hundred out?" she constantly asked herself.

The fact that the season was Christmas added a touch of poignancy to the situation. To go around with a smile on the lips while real fear is gnawing at the heart is like being obliged to sing blithely while pumping out the hold of a vessel doomed soon to sink. To make matters livelier, old Andrew acquired the Christmas-card habit—a loathsome mania when in the acute form—and she had to address them for him by the score, inventing a properly joyous and properly differentiating sentiment for each. To prove herself a gentleman and a friend to fifty people she did not know, and do it briefly enough to go by mail for a cent, was a wearing task. And The McAllister hated to have big issues treated hastily, often keeping her debating half an hour on the serious question of whether to send a certain man a picture of a cat in a mistletoe wreath, or of a plum pudding with steam coming out of the top. To risk a mistake would be terrible.

But the dear old man's childlike Christmas spirit was the right one, and she finally caught it, buckling down to the delightfully sticky occupation of making candied kumquats for her icicled friends in the cold belt. In grating the skin from these tiny citrus dainties she grated her own knuckles raw, to be sure, but also grated her soul free of its rough edges, being able to greet Christmas morning with the absolutely carefree sensation of knowing that she had not forgotten anybody.

And no morning could have dawned more lovely, or sent more sun to earth to lighten shadowed places.

"Merry Christmas indeed!" said Andrew, baring his courtly white head to the radiance and warmth, as he stepped upon the porch to greet it. He rubbed his thin old hands gratefully. "It has been many years,

my darling Annie Laurie, since I could utter 'Merry Christmas' so wholly from my heart. I have suffered more than you know in the biting north. To the old, the south is a happy haven."

"And to the young!" cried Laurie. "In spite of all my woes I feel as gambol-ish as a lamb."

Her early chores were over and done. She had fed the frizzly chickens so lavishly in honor of the day that they were all stepping around as dreamily as sleepwalkers, the hens crooning a ditty that said, plain as plain, "Tails, I lay an egg; heads, I won't."

Little Eva, loaded to the brim with fish and sentiment, sported an enormous red bow of ribbon over one ear, taking it very seriously as if she thought it was a house that was going to fall on her if she did not keep a good eye upon it.

" 'Woes'? A very far-fetched pleasantry, my dear!" scolded the old man, mildly severe. "I trust you are aware that you are a singularly fortunate young person, my darling."

He glanced impressively at the porch roof, then at the visible landscape, in order to rivet upon her the apparently escaping sense of her wealthy possessions.

"Moreover," glancing at his watch, "we are soon to take—er—dinner, *dinner* with the most respectful young gentleman I have met in America!"

"Grandpa, if you were just sixty years younger you would have something else to say about his 'respect.' You ought to hear him talk to *me*."

"Tch!" he ejaculated, dismissing the scurrilous persiflage. On the point of trotting back into the house, he paused to ask importantly, "What—may I ask—do you intend to wear at this—er—*dinner?*"

"I don't know," she answered, unregenerately enjoy-

ing hearing him choke over the word "dinner" as applied to a noonday meal. He had never permitted her so to use it. But evidently whatever Roycroft said was right. "What *shall* I wear, grandpa?"

"I advise the most charming gown you own," he answered, a trifle pleadingly. "I very much wish Charles to have a glimpse of my Annie Laurie at her prettiest and best. He has never seen you *look* the lady in his life."

"Nor act it," she acknowledged to herself, turning as red as a poinsettia. Hearing him called "Charles" in that ordinary fashion made her flush painfully. By accepting it she felt as guiltily immodest as though she too had been thus familiar, whereas he was never anything less dignified than "Mr. Roycroft" on her tongue, in her thoughts—or in her prayers.

The wild-rose flush deepened on her cheek while she dressed, and, with the help of her becoming dinner-gown, turned her into a very lovely lady indeed. Even callous Peter was smitten when he arrived with the carriage, though with two mettlesome bays on his mind and muscle, and with the exciting duty of being first to call "Cris'mus gif'!" heavy on his spirit.

But he need not have been worried. She knew the graceful tactics to be employed against an opponent of Peter's hue. So all the way from the house to the gate she pretended to be too busy picking specks from The McAllister's flawless black coat to remember what day it was.

"Cris'mus gif', Miss Laurie!"

"There! You caught me!" she exclaimed, exhibiting pretty chagrin with a naturalness that delighted Peter from his woolly pate to his new shoes.

She paid the penalty by presenting him with a purple

tie and a silver dollar when he helped her into the carriage.

"'Clar to mercy, Miss Laurie," he said, surveying her with beaming pride, "Mr. Rake-off ent need red candles on de table, lak he's got, not wiv yo' face a-shinin' over de dishes."

"Red candles," murmured The McAllister with satisfaction as he too took his seat. He rubbed his immaculately gloved hands gastronomically. Where red candles led the way, good food generally followed after.

Though Roycroft's residence was but half a mile distant across the lake, it was three miles off by way of the winding road; in fact his big tract of land ran all around Laurie's little patch, encircling her property in its stretching arms. His outlying pasture fields and nursery lay across the road from her gate.

Yet the trip to his house gave the bays nearly an hour's work. Such is sand.

"Upon my word! Upon my *word!*" exclaimed The McAllister, sitting upright and settling his eyeglasses in order to see more perfectly as the carriage entered Roycroft's massively simple gate of cypress logs—a grand, bare square of rough-hewn wood, banded and hinged with solid iron, demanding and commanding attention by reason of its magnificent lack of ornament. "Lord bless my soul, this resembles a British estate!" went on The McAllister, bestowing the highest praise he knew. For the carriage, after bowling along an avenue of pines, then entered an avenue of magnolias and smartly approached a mansion as beautiful as money and taste could make it. From its broad verandas to its red-tiled roof it was a veritable palm garden palace, being so screened by the feathery exotic things as to be visible only in exhilarating patches of a col-

umn here, or a corner of a conservatory there. But fascinating windows were everywhere, each owning a private balcony.

On the broad stone stairs stood Roycroft with welcoming hands outreached and a ringing "Merry Christmas!" on his lips. Curtseying back of him was Peter's better half, Celia. Celia was in a grand new black silk, and was fairly bursting with pride at having at last a lady guest to escort to the magnificent bedroom, someone who would lay "wraps" upon the embroidered coverlet, and make a good housekeeper feel that she had not been good for nothing.

Under Celia's flattering and artistic manipulations Laurie came out of the boudoir fifty times prettier than she had gone in, and she had gone in quite pretty enough. When she entered the reception room, and Roycroft stepped forward again to welcome her, she regarded him with gravely widening eyes, needing to study him hard in order to recognize the familiar points of her workaday friend. She could not quite make up her mind how she liked him best—whether in the boyish browns and tans of his grove clothes or in this princely proper outfit.

She had entirely forgotten that she herself was in the butterfly state, too, and she could not understand the soft wonder in his eyes when they rested upon her.

"What is it?" she asked, for there seemed to be something. Her voice was very low. For some reason or other she could not play the saucy lad with him as she was so very apt to do when the two of them met in the breezy open.

"You look so different," he answered, in strangely hushed tones.

"And you."

She never heard common words sing more like grand opera. The very atmosphere pricked with hidden electricity.

A line of poetry, heretofore classed as "balderdash" by her stern young spirit, now trembled into her memory fraught with exquisite sensibility—

> My soul is an enchanted boat,
> Which like a sleeping swan doth float,
> Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing.
> And thine doth like an angel sit,
> Beside the helm conducting it,
> While all the waves with melody are ringing.

She waited expectantly for what might come next.

"Dinner!" boomed the *chef*—Celia's biggest and blackest brother.

The ecstatic thread of magic silently snapped, and all became human again. Roycroft winsomely stepped down from his prince's throne and turned into a charming host.

Now there is no use trying to describe that dinner of 'possum and goose and plum pudding; no use trying to picture that table of gleaming glass and glittering silver and glow of candle-light; no use trying to paint the glorious tones of that cypress-paneled dining room hung with real holly and real mistletoe; no use trying to reproduce in cold words the warm mystic cheer of the aftermath of music and anecdotes. Enough to say that the day was Christmas, through and through.

Yet as hot noon turned to cool afternoon and parting time was come, The McAllister, who had latterly been regarding his pretty granddaughter with fidgety attention, broke out:

"You are very pale, my dear Annie Laurie?"

"Oh, no!" she cried, going vividly red in proof of her own truth.

"You have been very quiet for a long time, Miss Laurie; I have noticed it," said Roycroft, taking his guest's wrap from Celia and himself folding it around the girl's shoulders. "Are you tired?" he asked, worried.

"Oh, no," she answered. "No. Why should I be?" She forced a smile to her lips, and as soon as she could do so without marked incivility moved out of the range of his ministration.

"For one thing, because I have left you most rudely to your own devices this past hour," he said. "But your grandfather seemed to want to chat and——"

"I have been having a most beautiful time among your books," she asserted. "A most beautiful time."

"Books? The 's' is superfluous. You have sat with one book in your hands."

"Have you eyes in the back of your head?" she aggravatingly wanted to know.

"When necessary. What was the volume to hold you so?"

"It was a—was a history of England."

"It was my photograph album."

"That's what I said—in other words."

"There was something in it that annoyed you."

"Oh, no! No, indeed, Mr. Roycroft. You mustn't think so. I *am* a little tired. It has been a lovely day." She was wide awake and vivacious now. "We have enjoyed our visit so much. It has been a treat, hasn't it, grandpa? We can't thank you enough, Mr. Roycroft, can we, grandpa?"

"Tch! You make me nervous when you rattle on so

against time, my darling child. May I have your strong arm, Charles, my dear boy?"

The young man silently helped the old one down the steps and into the carriage. He as silently helped the girl to her place.

"Drive the other way around the lake, Peter," he then ordered. "Give Miss Laurie all the fresh air you can. I am afraid my hospitality has not particularly agreed with her. She is tired."

"A really remarkable resemblance to Miner's painting of Saint John the Divine," murmured The McAllister, almost falling out of the moving carriage in an endeavor to see the last of his late host.

For Roycroft stood gravely straight upon the stone steps, in his handsome eyes a look of deep inquiry, and the level rays of the setting sun lit up his hair, turning the bronze of it into a halo.

"Never saw Saint John in a high collar before," said Laurie unregenerately, as she languidly let her heavy eyelashes fall and obscure the picture.

The other way around the lake not only furnished the promised breeze, but provided Laurie with an unpremeditated diversion in chancing to take her past the bleak Carter domicile.

"Peter, stop," she begged, begging being utterly necessary considering Peter's distaste for the crackers. "I want to run in here for a minute. I'll be just as quick as I can. I know you won't mind waiting, will you, grandpa?"

"My time is yours, my angel," he remarked, benignly swimming in remembrance of a glass of "Charles' very best."

"Dese bays is powerful prone to r'ar when dey's kep' stannin' more'n five minutes," mourned Peter. Then

remembering the purple tie and the dollar he extended the limit. "Or mebbe ten."

She jumped out and ran up the path to the house, noting that a rake had been used to good effect in the sandy front yard, giving that usually frowsy outlook a combed and cared-for appearance.

All rent and distorted by his frantic yelps of joy, Jax dashed down on three legs to meet her, holding the fourth leg in the air, not because it was injured, but for the same reason that Josh Billings spelled wrong—to be funny.

Tallahassie rushed out next, barking and yelping almost like a joyous little dog herself. The sprite of a child was quite wonderfully neat and dressed up.

"I can tell by one look at you that it's Christmas, Tallahassie," cried the laughing visitor, while being hugged and kissed.

"Ef you's goin' by the shoes an' stockuns I have on, it's been Christmas for a long whiles," said Tallahassie, jigging constantly. "An', Laurie, you jes' hear how much gooder I speak nor I used; for Osceoly now she learns me my lessons eve'y night. Come on up to the house an' see our lean-to kitchen. Cal Tandy an' pap's been a-buildin' it for two-three weeks, off an' on—pap off an' Cal on, I reckon."

"Why, have you been painting your house?" asked Laurie while being dragged up the porch steps. "Gracious, how nice everything is!" For the eviscerated sofa had had its bursting spirals restrained and was covered with pretty calico besides. The empty boxes and trash were nowhere to be seen.

"Nope. Not painted. Jes' clared up. Hain't it the beatingest what soap'll do? Stidder paintin' we scraped some off, see?"

And, blessed to relate, the sky-blue front door had been sand-papered back to normal. It no longer shrieked aloud to the passers-by for help and pity.

"And you've had glass put in your kitchen windows," discovered Laurie.

" 'Tain't kitchen now, it's a parlor," explained Tallahassie proudly. "Di'n I tell you Cal an' pap's built us a lean-to for a kitchen?"

"Where's everybody else?"

"Say, honey, git yo're eye on *me!*" caroled Mrs. Carter, coming out to answer for herself, and enfolding Laurie in a close onion-y embrace. Then she veered off a few feet and stiffly put herself on view, turning slowly around like a model in a clothing store. "What you think of me?"

"You're lovely," was the girl's unreserved verdict.

And truly Mrs. Carter was as comely a young mother as ever was shone upon by a Florida Christmas sun. Her hair was twisted into the tidiest kind of a pretzel and was skewered neatly to her head. But the wonderful part of her was her dress—a spotless new affair of beruffled blue serge in the latest style.

"Hain't I the sight?" asked Mrs. Carter, fluttering proudly as a turkey-cock. "Osceoly now she done it an' dolled me out in it, an' she promises me a jaunt to Tampa with money enough to buy some teeth to match!"

"But where *is* Osceola? And where's Lee?" asked Laurie. She already knew where Mr. Carter was, having seen the back of that gentleman entering the woodshed.

"Lee, honey? Set down a bit an' let me tell the news," said Mrs. Carter, bestowing herself and her guest upon the sofa. "Lee? Why, Lee's a-feedin' an' a-fattenin'

up to Georgy! Osceoly, she got a job at the packing house an' sent him to that there sandytorium you tole her of. First let me take back all I ever said again' eddication. Eddication's fine. But I've foun' out that eddication's some like vaccination, an' has to swole an' fester jes' so much to let you know it's took. An' after swolin' an' festerin' till we mos' couldn't stand it, Osceoly's eddication's took splendid. She's got us *all* in hand. An' the reports from Lee's awful 'couragin'."

"Oh, I'm so glad, so very glad!"

"Yes, he's most—wal, most *unhooked* by now," said the pleased mother, swallowing discreetly over the symptoms of the cure. "Though he's sent back word he'd about as soon keep the disease as take the hot powder they air spoonin' into him. But Osceoly's boun' to have him there till he's well."

"But where is she? I do so want to see her!"

"I reckon that's all she's waitin' to hear, honey," said Mrs. Carter, happily waving the guest to the open door of the new "parlor." "Go in an' hunt her, an' take a look round. We're mighty elegant."

Needing no further invitation, Laurie went into the transmogrified kitchen and found her penitent little cracker friend in embarrassed ambush there. Osceola was in a new dress of flaming red, but wore it to her own positive adornment and to the credit of the vicinity, as a cardinal bird its vivid plumage. Her brown curls clustered shyly around a neck and cheek almost as red as the dress.

"Merry Christmas!" cried Laurie, glorying in the words that made renewal of friendship a simple and natural thing.

Osceola quickly put her arms around her, whispering

in a frantic hurry, "I'm trying hard to be good and I am as happy as the day is long."

"What a lot of improvements you've made!" said Laurie, wisely sidetracking everything else.

So Osceola showed them to her in detail—the stove had been taken out, the floor scrubbed, the windows curtained, the best chairs and tables retained, some of the prettiest flowering plants brought in—result, a parlor.

"I don't see when you have done it—working all day," observed Laurie.

"Mostly in the evening, and—and—I've had Cal to help. Last night he brought me a present."

"What was it?" asked Laurie, seeing that the question was expected of her.

Osceola held up her small brown hand and showed a ring that was no less a triumph of art than of rhetoric, for it was in the likeness of two flat little gold hearts spiked together, apparently forever and forever and forever.

"Cal seems to like—our house—now it's tidy."

"I am glad that everything is right between you, Osceola."

"He told me that he had *thought*—he wanted—you."

"By telling you he proved himself very honorable, Osceola."

"Calhoun never had to *prove* hisself—himself—honorable, to *me!*" flashed from the little cracker, loyally. Recovering her poise, she went on with her fragmentary tale. "He asked me if I was afraid to take him—knowing it."

"And you said——?"

"That I was afraid of nothing but life without him,"

answered Osceola with artless candor. "Then he kissed me and said——"

"Oh, I can guess what he said, Osceola!" in an endeavor to spare her, if she needed to be spared.

"No, you can't," said Osceola, "for I couldn't have guessed it myself, and I've thought lots about it since. He said, 'We'll take the low road together, my poor little wild bird of an Osceola.' Why do you suppose he said 'poor'?"

"Because it's right for every man to feel sorry for the girl who accepts him," remarked Laurie, promulgating it firmly.

"No one need feel sorry for me," smiled Osceola happily. "Oh, Laurie, you don't know how grand it is to be loved by the person you love!"

"That's true, I don't," answered Laurie, gayly smiling in unison. But she began to remember that she was tired—very, very tired. "I must go," she said.

"What's your hurry?" asked Mrs. Carter, as she ran down the porch steps. "Stay an' we'll open something or cut something."

"I have to go or Peter will kill me," she answered.

"Lawsee," said Tallahassie, escorting her to the gate. "I wouldn't speak thataway of no nigger! Hain't Peter paid to wait?"

"Look how late it's getting," said Laurie, pointing to the west.

"The coffee tells the smell of parting day,"

grinned Tallahassie, hopping. "Shucks, waren't I the dunce *then*?"

Peter used the whip on the bays to some purpose and the McAllisters were soon at home again. Then fell the

quick dark of the south, and there was a long evening to be struggled through. Laurie tried to make it as cheerful as she could. She lit the indoors lamps and sang carols to her appreciative audience of one. But coming to the line,

Oh, rest upon the weary road and hear the angels sing!

she stopped with a break in her voice.

"Has the happy day been too much for you, my darling?" asked The McAllister wonderingly and a trifle wistfully.

"A little," she answered, going to him where he sat and kneeling on the floor beside him for him to lay his hand upon her hair. She strangely felt a desire to be cared for, to be for once the ward instead of the guardian.

They both sat thinking of their late host.

"I have found out who he is," observed Andrew, after delighted reverie. "On his mother's side he is a Caxton, and I went to school with Gerald Caxton; that makes him absolutely a desirable acquaintance, my darling, absolutely!"

"I should hate to vouch for everybody *I* went to school with," she said, smiling faintly as she remembered Manhattan's cosmopolitan primer class.

"But I am speaking of a British institution!"

Rather fearing his hand's majestic withdrawal, she caught it and kissed it apologetically, then laid her cheek against it, thinking.

In Roycroft's photograph album there had been picture after picture of the beautiful English girl whose miniature was in his watch. Sometimes she was mature and magnificent in ball gowns; sometimes fascinatingly

girlish in garden dress; always she was aristocratic and lovely. And upon the photograph which had come but a day or so ago she had written with the frank audacity of security,

"From her who best loves you, to him who best loves me!"

CHAPTER XVI

ON the morning when one has to give one's pet kitten away is it not noticeable how much prettier she seems than usual, how more than ordinarily fond of one, how extra full of attractive antics?

Following the general philosophy of the above—for Little Eva was not in the least concerned with the circumstances, and was far too much of an imbecile to be given away to anyone or taken—Laurie thought she had never seen her grove look more promising than it did that sultry, muggy January morning.

The golden fruit positively spelled the inspiring message "Cash soon" as it hung in rich plenty, ripely ready to fall into the hands of the pickers. And Selig had sent word that his dusky horde of strippers with their ladders and bags and clipping shears might be expected any day.

The feeling that the winter season was practically over and had passed without the catastrophe of a cold snap, went to Laurie's head with a rush of relief that temporarily turned her into a fit mistress for an idiot pussy. She did not know how sickeningly heavy had been her constant anxiety till it blew over and blew away and set her free. Her feet danced, her spirit soared, and she acted as she felt—like a happy child.

Mrs. Carter had told her to "rag" two or three trees for her own use, and she had done it; that is she had tied warning strips of calico to such as she intended to

keep free from the pickers who, so Mrs. Carter said, "were mighty apt to git around some sun-up and clean the grove afore breakfas' like crows in a cornfield."

There is a saying that there are two things a woman can do without the year round in Florida—a hat and a house.

"You can do without a jacket, too," remarked Laurie this morning, peeling hers from her and throwing it to the porch rail. She glanced at the thermometer which hung outside, and saw that it stood at sixty-five. "Wouldn't have been surprised to have you say ninety," she told it, so irrationally gay that she was willing to talk aloud to anything and everything.

"Has Charles come?" asked her grandfather, trotting around a corner of the porch. "He checkmated me yesterday and promised me an early revenge. Is he here?"

"No, I was just talking to the——" On the point of finishing the old adage in regard to people who chat with themselves, she stopped short. The frightful word "devil" would have entailed half an hour's worth of explanation, and she wanted to escape into the grove to gather some "drops" for a fruit salad.

So she waved her hand and went, leaving The McAllister pottering around the porch pretending to snip dead leaves from the blossoming Bignonia vine that was now covering the house with its fiery yellow clusters, but in reality hoping to waylay his young neighbor should that busy young man happen to row over.

In the grove, under the interlacing trees, the air was almost unendurably stuffy.

"Let me get out of this as soon as I can," the girl told herself, filling her apron with fruit, "for I can hardly breathe."

As she spoke she looked up in time to see that Roycroft had indeed rowed over, but with other ideas besides chess, for he strode rapidly past the house and entered the grove, searching for her. She stood holding up her apron bulging with fruit, and since she was doing the work of a field hand she felt entitled to use the language.

"Howdy, man," she greeted him jubilantly. "How *is* yo'-all dis mawnin'? An', lawsee, Mr. Rake-off, it's so warm I ent know wedder it's Janooa'y or *July*!"

He usually hated her when she talked darky, and could be relied upon to be properly haughty and consequently entertaining in reply. But this time he seemed not to recognize the challenge.

"You are right about the weather, it is not safe," he said quickly. "I have come over to talk to you about it."

"You must be fond of exercise," she commented. "Rowing clear across a lake in order to talk about the weather."

"I am fearful of the signs," he went on, still too earnest to heed her flippancies. "They began to be dangerous yesterday. They point to——"

He paused and frowned thoughtfully around at the ungathered harvest of fruit.

"To what?" she asked, her insouciant smile gradually dying.

"To a serious drop in temperature—to a freeze, in fact."

"How you everlastingly keep *stewing* over one thing or another," she finally remarked, with dismal inelegance. This particular man always stirred her to inelegance by reason of his constantly rigid propriety.

She wondered if he *ever* threw off his calm reserve, ever waked to action that was not planned and precise, ever spoke in other accents than those of carefully modulated accuracy. "Why, is that a train?" she rather irrelevantly asked.

She kept quiet to listen, and in the silence remembered that she herself had unconsciously been taking note of the abnormal "signs" of the past few hours. The wind had seemed to come from a different quarter, bringing sounds that were unusual. A fog whistle from some far-off coast was one. This present tooting of a locomotive was another.

Unlike children that are "to be seen and not heard," trains in that vicinity were the exact opposite—if heard, then never seen. Just now, down the main track that was several miles to the west, a freight was evidently laboring, and its engine incessantly shrieked and whistled in maniacal din.

"What ails it?" she asked, amazed. "Fits?"

The sounds kept on.

"Maybe cows," she continued, willing to give it every charitable chance.

"An alarm of what I feared—a freeze."

"As if the engine knew! Stop joking."

But "joking" was not exactly the word to explain Roycroft's tense expression.

"Please listen," he asked, lifting his hand for silence.

And as the unseen train went down the line its discordant screams were not allowed a moment's cessation. The fright of them seemed to linger pulsingly on the stillness, even after distance had stifled them.

"An engineer giving himself a rowdy good time," translated the girl carelessly, ready to dismiss the incident.

"An engineer giving us warning of dangerous cold on the way," corrected the man gravely.

"How do you know?"

"The same thing happened two years ago when the blizzard swept in from the northwest. The engineers are instructed thus to warn districts which are cut off from telegraph as ours is."

She weakly loosened her grasp on her apron, letting the treasures fall unheeded. What was the use of a few if the whole were going?

"Now don't give way," he ordered sharply. "At least you are prepared."

But he looked at the grove condemningly. The preparation that counts is proper feeding, and these trees had been starved for years. That they happened now to be bearing plentifully was just a freak of Nature, which cheerful girl often sends a gratuitous crop in a disorderly spirit of fun—at least there is no other way of accounting for it.

"*I* don't believe there is a cold wave coming," Laurie said stubbornly. "Why, the day is hot—hot. The thermometer says a trifle over sixty-five. I just looked. Come up to the house and see for yourself."

She led the way to the spot where the instrument hung, he quietly following, and when there turned the thermometer to him for his inspection.

"Sixty-four," he read.

He glanced up at the sullen sun in the sky. It was still climbing to the zenith, and the mercury should have been climbing with it, not falling.

"Maybe I missed a degree," said the girl nervously. "Anyhow, what's the matter with sixty-four? Can't it tumble to thirty-two degrees before it does damage?"

"To twenty-eight."

"I thought thirty-two was freezing point."

"So it is, but the skin of an orange is its overcoat. My fruit could stand a brief drop to twenty-five. Even be the better for it, because I would only lose the culls."

"And my fruit?" she asked anxiously.

He studied his reply carefully, then gave it.

"In danger at twenty-nine; done for at twenty-six."

"There won't *be* any twenty-six," she exclaimed hurriedly. "From sixty-five to twenty-six! it's not possible."

"I sincerely trust not."

"Done for," she repeated below her breath. The dreadful words applied to a great deal more than the crop alone. The trees would be done for, the home would be done for, the furniture, the food, the future.

"What are you two confabbing about?" asked The McAllister genially, as he peered over the porch rail at them.

His very geniality stabbed his granddaughter with a new knife of fear, fear for him. His gentleness was much greater than it had ever been, and sprung largely from his sense of contentment in the south; it had grown gradually upon him as the result of his huge enjoyment in having a permanent home and sharing in the grandeur of owning a grove, a real live grove scheduled to support them indefinitely, and very aristocratically.

Laurie's frightened glance signaled Roycroft, "Don't tell him!"

"As usual, sir, talking trees," smiled the young man, lifting his hat.

"Can't I induce you to talk 'queen's bishop's pawn, one'?"

"Not this morning, sir, I am on my way back across the lake." Then in a quick undertone, "Miss Laurie, please walk with me to the boat."

This she did, subconsciously becoming cheered by the feel of the warm sand beneath her feet, and the gentle breath of the water upon her cheek. Roycroft's canoe rocked as gently upon the water as upon a summer pond, scarcely tugging at the rope which tethered it to the wobbly centipede of a rotting dock. Surely everything was exactly as it always had been!

" 'Never trouble trouble till trouble troubles you,' " she quoted, plucking up her spirits.

But Roycroft's question skipped right over her hopeful obstruction.

"Have you everything ready," he asked, "to fire your grove?"

She glanced back over her shoulder, sizing up the hundred or more piles of wood stacked among her trees. On warm days the piles had looked colossal and had carried a rather comic impression. To-day, with a freeze flying southward, they seemed to dwindle tragically.

"Do you think I'll have to light them?" she asked, her uneasy heart falling again.

"There is no telling, but be absolutely ready."

"Mr. Roycroft," she said, putting her hand unconsciously and very desperately to her head, as if to steady a sudden giddiness, "I've just thought of something; the fires won't be of any use."

"And why? Did you arrange the waste as I told you?"

"Oh, yes, they are fixed all right, but think of this: it will take me five minutes to light each fire; there are over a hundred fires; six hundred minutes would be ten hours—ten hours! The grove would freeze, and there

is no help to be hired even if I could hire it. Oh, what am I to do? What *am* I to do?"

"You're to sit tight, that's what you're to do," ordered Roycroft, almost fiercely in his great pity. "Sit tight and keep your nerve."

"All right, I will," she answered, immediately steadying herself and laughing a little at his cavalry instructions.

"There is no danger till nightfall," he said, untying his boat, "and may be none then; but watch the mercury—it is sure to go down to forty. The moment it starts to climb you are safe and can afford to go to bed to sleep."

"And if it keeps on dropping?"

"Send for me."

"Why, no," she said, pushing the idea resolutely from her. "This is my own particular misery, why should I drag you into it?"

"Because you cannot hope to get out of it unaided, and because an old man's fortunes are involved as well as your own," he replied practically, stepping into the canoe.

"That is so," she answered breathlessly, "but——"

"But——?"

"How can I send?"

"Signal."

"*How?*"

"Shoot twice."

With a stroke of the paddle he skimmed afar.

"Moreover, no fire should take five minutes to light," he informed her firmly, across a rapidly widening sheet of water. "I should say three to a minute—figure *that* out."

She turned away to hide hysterical mirth. He looked

as straight and handsome as Lohengrin, but was tutoring like a pedagogue.

And let her smile while yet she could, for the day grew grayer and graver, each hour seeming to open a new door at the north pole and let in a stronger current of cool air.

"Brrrr!" shiveringly snorted The McAllister after lunch, looking around him as impotently and severely as Little Eva when she accused somebody, somewhere, of making her uncomfortable. "Is it possible that I feel *cold*, Annie Laurie?"

"Very possible, grandpa," she answered, assuming great light-heartedness. "We can actually have a fire in your bedroom grate—won't that be lovely? The thermometer says fifty. I'll keep glorious fires in the sitting room and kitchen. We'll be too cozy for words."

The pleasant novelty of toasting himself before a crackling open blaze cheered the old gentleman immensely, and gave him a great many weird things to do with a poker.

But what comfort could the lonely little lady of the house take in a warmth that was on one side of the wall only? Outside, the mercury fell steadily, going down one relentless point after another. With the coming of night it had dropped to forty.

The chilled frizzly chickens very sensibly tried to go to roost on the edge of the wood-box in the kitchen, and they clucked and queed most irritably when she tucked them under her arms, two at a time, and carried them back to the henhouse. This being a summery, slatted place, she had to cover it with sacking and bits of old carpet.

By now the cold was hopelessly in her own bones and she was constantly a-tremble, for when fear, rather

than freeze, sets the teeth to chattering winter coats are not particularly warming.

"I intend to retire," The McAllister stated majestically at about eight o'clock. "Florida is disappointing me. I am—am *astonished* at it. You being a sensible child, my darling, I know you will retire also."

She covered over her lack of assent by bustlingly rebuilding his fire and piling his bed high with blankets. Then she brought him hot cocoa by way of a sleeping potion.

"I shall wrap up my head and ears and sleep like a top," he informed her drowsily. "Good night and happy dreams to you, my dear! Like a top!"

She kissed him and closed his door upon him, glad not to have to listen any longer to his cheerful chatter, for her heart was like lead, and with good cause—the thermometer when last read had stood at thirty-nine.

She crept out again to the windy dark porch, scratched a match, and took another look at the silver tube—thirty-eight.

She went back into the sitting-room and tried to read, but could not keep her mind on the print, nor her eyes. The very warmth of the room sent her thoughts wandering outside where it was cold, cold, cold. Now and then Little Eva would give a questioning "Purr?" that would send her into a clammy perspiration of dread, showing her that fear was close indeed to her heels, the least sound seeming to say "the end is here." Again and again she crept out to watch the mocking mercury.

At half-past ten it stood at thirty-four. Then, so desperate with anxiety that she preferred to watch the thing fall before her eyes rather than sit in a warm room and vainly wait for it to go up, she bundled her-

self in ulster and cap, went out and huddled down on the porch steps.

Then followed a vigil of awful loneliness. The chill and stillness of the night appalled her. Above, the stars glittered more coldly than points of spears. Sudden ghostly and icy gusts of wind kept rushing in silently from somewhere and dying down, leaving behind it a sinister frozen calm. The "swash" of the unseen black lake sounded colder than the crack of ice.

A slow hour shuddered away, and as the middle of the long night approached it brought with it frightening noises of unfamiliar nature, not to be explained by similar sounds of day. There were mysterious footfalls as if animals were a-prowl and rustling in the underbrush, and movements of branches even when the wind was quiet as death. And constantly came the nickering scream of owls, exactly like the last strangling shriek of a person being murdered.

Midnight came, bringing with it the mental depression and added fear that it always brings to the lonely watcher. Watching was bad enough in the light; it was dreadful in the complete dark, with no glimmer near or far that was made by human hands, no sociable beacon of any kind to take away the desolate feeling that one is completely isolated in a world of trouble.

And a person who waits for a calamitous stroke from the careless whim of Nature must do so without the faintest hope of being able to prevent it. If Nature wants to drown out a field with too much rain, or fry it to a cinder with too little, there is nothing to be done but to let her go ahead.

The delight taken by this Spartan Mother in destroying in an hour the work that has taken her patient children years, is one of those mysteries on which the bulle-

tins of the agricultural department are particularly silent.

Parched with fears, Laurie stole to the pump for a drink, and when there forgot her thirst, for over the water pail she found that a thin film of ice had formed. She ran back to the thermometer—twenty-nine.

"In danger at twenty-nine; done for at twenty-six," he had said.

Obeying a mechanical impulse, she took the box of matches in her hand and made a step towards the nearest pile of grove-wood, then stopped, helpless. She could never light them all in time, and the frozen avenues of the grove were impenetrably dark. She turned and looked in the direction of the lake; there it was pitch black too. What hope had she that Roycroft had stayed up the night long on the mere chance that she might need him? Even as she stood trying to convince herself that she would never send for him, she drew the revolver from her pocket and fired the two crashing shots of the signal.

"Oh, Mr. Roycroft, won't you please come?" she heard herself praying aloud.

She strained her eyes through the darkness to the place where the lake lay coldly splashing. Next, "God bless you, honey," she whispered in hysterical relief, for a speck of lantern-light moved swiftly across the opposite shore.

An eternity seemed to pass as she watched that little light grow stronger as it forged steadily towards her over the water. Entirely forgetting the perhaps mythical frogs and snakes of the lake region—a fearfully remote region by night—she ran pell-mell down to the dock, reaching it just as the little boat was being tied.

"Well, Miss Laurie, the freeze is here!" sang out

Roycroft very cheerfully, taking the landing at a jump. "The last minute is up. Our business now is to fight. I would have been with you long before, but I have a coldish corner in my grove where I have the fire pots and I had to light them. This was the one evening of the year, of course, when Peter had to attend a conference."

While cheerily talking, he had put his arm under hers and was steering her back to the house and the grove, steadying her over the rough and stumbling places, seeming to know by instinct where they would be, though it was not *his* hard road that he was traveling.

"I got so frightened I had to send for you," she said simply, wondering a little where the worst of the fright had gone; for gone it had.

She had been called upon to meet many troubles in her short life, and to meet them by herself. This was the first crisis in which she had ever felt the warm, reassuring contact of a man's courageous muscles ready to work with her and for her. The sensation was a radiant revelation, making miracles possible. The arm which he supported in comforting, hugging, brotherly fashion became an electrical supply station to her whole body, recharging her with vigor of hope. Night might still be around her and ruin ahead, but both had lost their worst terrors.

Even the thermometer seemed to be his concern more than hers, for it was he who struck the match and read it. She saw the record and spoke it like a cry, "Twenty-eight!"

"Get busy without loss of a second," he ordered, dropping his leisurely tone. "You fire this row, I the next, then we meet and come up the next two. Understand?"

Like all frank-minded, clean-souled men, he had, when under excitement, unguessed inflexions in his voice which were a sure index to his thought. And she clearly heard the unspoken words, "But the firing is not going to save."

Still the attempt had to be made. She flung herself on her knees before the nearest woodpile, struck a match and applied it to the slag-like lump of turpentine.

It ignited at once with a spluttering roar and a smudge of greasy smoke—a whole factory chimney in itself. Simultaneously the woodpile burst into flame; it resembled a miniature cabin on fire. The terrific blaze where all had been darkness before was a magnificent and startling sight. Dazzled and dazed, she sat back on her knees, watching fascinated.

"No time to kotow, don't you know!" called Roycroft, excusably indignant with her for her prompt subsidence. "And use a torch of fat pine. Don't stop to scratch a match."

Already he was four fires down his line, and she had to fly indeed in order to keep up with him. Soon the midnight became as day. The background which had so long been a solid wall of black, now began to separate itself into individual trees. The near ones were as distinct as if the sun was pouring on them. Across the road Roycroft's pasture field leaped vividly into view, showing its rank dead grass and sentinel pines standing among the rows of nursery stock which Peter had been indefatigably "heeling" for weeks to protect the budded stock from this night's visitation.

The crackle and snap and crash of consuming logs became inspiring, giving a person a feeling that so much noise had to be of some good. Rills of heat circled around the nearly doomed grove. Speeding like

good demons, the man and girl applied their torches down one row and up another, down and up, down and up, till in less than half an hour the entire grove was under leaping fire—a decidedly awe-striking sight, for the whole countryside was lit by it—not only the lake but the opposite shore were brightly aglow. Mighty shadows staggeringly rose and fell like struggling giants.

"I call it—a fine job!" panted the girl, backing up against the wall of her house for a rest.

"Well rawther!" assented Roycroft, also breathless.

"Lawn party—all to ourselves," she went on, still so thrilled by the fiery results that she had really forgotten the grave cause.

But he remembered and went to the thermometer, needing no match now to read it.

"Oh, yes!" she said with a gasp of recollection. She followed him and stood anxiously at his elbow. "What does it say?" she begged—"*Thirty-seven?*"

"Twenty-seven."

He gave it without comment.

"Oh, no, no, no!" she implored, wanting to refuse the evidence of her own second look.

"That isn't possible! Not with all this heat! How *could* it go down?"

"Because the temperature outside the fire-zone must be even lower."

"Then the grove is done for—as you said?"

"Do not despair yet," he answered, "your fires have not yet reached their height. All we can do is to wait. Leave things to me. You can now go inside where it is warm and lie down."

"No, I can't"—wanly—"not unless I took the thermometer with me."

"You ought to be sleepy."

"I am."

"Then make yourself some coffee."

"Will you have some?"

"Awfully obliged, but no."

"Nor I," she answered. The commonplace little social conversation had been a relief—anything to forget the thermometer. "I'll stay out here with you."

"Are you warmly enough clad?"

"Don't I look it?"

She convincingly displayed herself to him in the scarlet of the fires. Her fuzzy loose ulster went from chin to ankles; a little Dutch cap snuggled her bright hair; her hands were rammed manfully deep in her coat pockets; her eyes gleamed deeply from a small face that was very white with anxiety.

In response to her invitation, he now viewed her intently, towering finely above her, a very handsome man indeed in the boyish glories of a loudly striped mackinaw.

"You look——" he began, then stopped annoyingly short.

"Not smudged?" she begged. The pine soot had been thick.

Again he viewed her intently, saying with unusual gentleness, "You look small, and tired, and worried, and lonely, and very——"

"Very what?"

"As the only means of restraining the devilish gayety you display when people are serious, I shall refrain from saying it."

"Small, tired, and lonely, I'm not. As for worried—please look at the beast again, Mr. Roycroft."

Time was when he would have gnawed his lip haugh-

tily and asked her what she meant by "beast," but he was very human and helpful to-night. He went right over to the thermometer.

After noting it he said nothing.

"How much?" she asked, unable to stand the silence, and knowing that it foreboded no good.

"Twenty-seven."

And this time the fires were at their highest and fiercest. In fact, those which had been first kindled were now on the decrease; they had given their best. No more was to be expected of them.

She clenched her hands, gripping her pockets from the inside as though symbolically trying to throttle Fate. Unable to stand still, she paced restlessly to and fro. As for him, he held his ground, straight and quiet as an Indian.

Long minutes went by, and each lessened the raging of the fires.

"I wish you wouldn't stand there dumb as a totem pole, Mr. Roycroft," she remarked, coming to a miserable pause before him. "Can't you say something?"

"Yes! Why do you not call me Charles, as your grandfather does?"

"Because I'm not my grandfather."

"Tha—anks. Reelly would not have thought of that —by myself." He drew out his watch.

Laurie lightly touched the case where the miniature lay hidden.

"Does she call you Charles?" she affably asked.

"No."

"No? Why? Has no grandfather?"

"She calls me Charlie."

"That is a very pleasant sounding name," she commented gently, startled to see where her rudeness had

led her, and striving to make amends, "and one that grandpa really reveres for the sake of the Bonnie Prince. Where is the Scot who does not love a 'Charlie'?"

"Not a mile away, I fancy. You are Scotch."

"Indeed, no!" she contradicted hotly, "I'm an American!"

"*Ah!*" he softly ejaculated, making the expletive convey the impression that now were explained many of her asperities of disposition and oddities of conduct.

After this bit of fencing in which they both gladly rushed so as to fill in time, he consulted the watch.

"If we could but hold it off for two hours we would win," he muttered.

"What is the time?" she asked, pacing nervously again.

"Nearly three."

As she continued to walk back and forth the cold returned to her bones again, the fear to her soul, the tremble to her voice.

Finally Roycroft stepped to her side. The kindly action frightened her, for it told her plainly that trouble was close to her and that this one friend was staunchly trying to come between.

"The fires are *all* on the wane," he merely said.

"I saw you look at the thermometer. What does it say?"

"Twenty-six."

"Twenty-six." She repeated the statement stoically.

Then she broke down and wept, hiding her small white face in her hands.

"Laurie, I beg of you——"

"It's only two hundred and forty dollars worth, Mr. Roycroft, and must seem a silly trifle to you who are

so rich, but it meant all the world to grandpa and me. It would have paid the debt and the taxes, and have left us enough to live on for several months!"

"Have I acted as if it seemed a silly trifle to me?"

"Indeed you have not. Forgive me. You have frozen yourself and stayed awake all night to help," she sobbed on brokenly, "but what has been the use? The crop is killed. There's nothing else to be done but let it go on and die. I have fought and lost—lost everything."

"Did your grandfather hoe the fire line?" he abruptly asked.

"Yes," she answered, looking up at him dispiritedly, wondering how he could think of so foreign a thing at such a time.

"On both sides of your fences? Be sure of your answer, *dead sure*, Laurie."

"Both sides. Sat on a soap box and hoed everything he could reach."

"Stay here, please. Do just as I tell you now. Stay here."

"Where are you going?" she asked anxiously, for he was leaving her.

"Going to see," he called back.

When he was gone, she sat down literally in the dust with her hands clenched in her lap. She was thinking, thinking. How she had pruned, and worked and sprayed and raked and tended, all to no end but this last tragic consummation of ruin! And the bitter irony of the thought that if the pickers had only come two days before, as they so easily might have done, all would have been saved! On such grotesquely small things do futures hinge. And what was to happen about the furniture? Now that the mortgage could not

possibly be paid, Selig owned it. She remembered the greedy glitter of his eyes when they had appraised the Chippendale table, and when he had gouged his thumb testingly into the ebony frame of the mirror. And, oh, her poor, poor grandfather! To one so old, so unbusiness-like, so frantically proud, foreclosure would mean disgrace and death. She well knew it.

It was at this juncture in her frenzied musings that there arrestingly came to her nostrils the pungently aromatic odor of a new substance burning, not dead wood and dead grasses, but wood with sap in it, grass and weeds with live juices in it—a smarting, *contraband* smell of something burning that had no business to burn!

Next, she scrambled to her feet in an access of terror, for the whole heavens leaped into blaze, and the devastating roar of a general conflagration was all around her. There was fire on every side. Her little grove lay in two huge arms of it, lay unharmed, like a kitten basking before a raging hearth.

And now Roycroft came running up to her from an entirely different point of the compass to the one at which he had disappeared.

"It is your fields that have caught!" she cried, anguished for him.

"That is what they have," he answered, his breath coming in jerks.

"Your fields, your pasture grass, your young trees, your big pines! But never from my fires. Someone must have done it!"

"Undoubtedly. Someone must have done it!" he answered.

In that unpoliced district it was no unheard-of thing for cattlemen illicitly to fire a tract in order to start

new grass. And this criminal vandalism usually occurred by night. It was no safe trick to risk by day.

"How can you take it so calmly?" she raged. "Get after him. Do something. Identify him. Be able to have him arrested. It is a state's prison offense."

"But no one saw him do it," pointed out Roycroft imperturbably.

"Oh, look! How terrible!" Laurie shuddered, seeing snakes of fire writhe up several pines and turn them into blazing torches. "Your grove will go! Your lovely, lovely house will go!"

"No," answered he, laughing excitedly. "I figured on that. You see the fires are burning towards each other. They will meet in the middle and put each other out."

"You *figured on that?*" she echoed, astounded. "Then it was you who—you who——"

"Come, have a look at the mercury," he cheerfully advised. He jubilantly took her elbow and piloted her to the thermometer. "There! Good work, by Jove! Twenty-eight and going up!"

"What have you done! What have you done!" she disconsolately wailed, not able to take her mind from the sacrificial holocaust.

"Warmed things," he replied, comfortably. "Come, sit down with me on the porch steps, Miss Laurie, while we watch Rome burn. My fires have not half started, my word for it!"

And he was right. Each moment the heat and roar increased. Had not The McAllister had his head swathed in woolens, and possessed a private glare in his open grate, he most certainly would have been routed out. As it was he slept serenely.

Roycroft took off his mackinaw as superflous. As

for the thermometer, he no longer bothered about it. He and the girl sat and watched silently. Talking would have been too much of a bellowing task to undertake, anyhow.

Worn out by opposing conflicts, dulled by the noise and smoke, the girl finally dropped asleep, unaware of it, knowing only that the wide fire seemed to narrow to a dancing thread and then blow out in the peaceful darkness of unremembered dreams.

When she awoke it was to a consciousness first of buttons and a watch chain surprisingly near her face; next she realized that her pillow, though warm and comfortable, was not of the usual downy consistency; finally she saw a gray sky above her in lieu of a bedroom roof. That made her sit up with a remembering haste.

"Have I been asleep?" she confusedly asked.

"Very probably," he answered with extreme courtesy of doubt, considering that he had held her for an hour and that his mackinaw was still folded around her.

"Oh, my goodness!" she murmured, swaying to her feet and backing to a correct conventional distance. "I am sure I am very much obliged to you for—" but the real indebtedness was too heavy and awful to mention—"obliged to you for your coat," she ended, red but polite.

"You are entirely welcome," he answered, snatching after his watch which in the scramble had been jerked from his pocket.

"I hope I didn't hurt it," she mentioned, trying to tuck her hair neatly away under her cap again. If it was going to play sneak thief it had better be confined.

"You cannot hurt this turnip," he replied. His

limber language proved that it had humanized him considerably to be up all night. He at once examined the miniature. "The only valuable thing about it is this picture of my mother."

"Your mother," exclaimed the girl, craftily covering up her vehemence by adding composedly, "is very young looking."

"Young looking? My word!" he exclaimed, surveying the picture with all of a son's utter disbelief in a parent's youth.

While he was engaged in winding and otherwise cosseting his timepiece, she took a step forward and examined the surrounding landscape, living over again the battle of the night. Through the gray of the dawn she saw that her fruit hung practically uninjured. Down the rows where the woodpiles so long had stood there were now but a hundred heaps of ashes. She forced her gaze to travel farther, her soul shrinking from what she knew she would see. And she saw it—Roycroft's fields lying in black waste, the tender nursery stock charred to death, some pine stumps still smoldering and burning to tell the tale.

In mute anguish she turned and looked at the man who had done so much for her. Her eyes filled with tears.

"What now, Miss Laurie?" he asked, rising and coming towards her. "Believe me, you ought to be smiling, for your crop is safe as the Bank of England."

"I was thinking of the cost," she answered. "How can I ever thank you?"

"By letting me be present when that fox of a Selig tries to underpay you," he answered, unceremoniously departing to his boat.

He was brave enough to face anything but gratitude.

CHAPTER XVII

SOME two weeks later the fruit was picked. A rollicking horde of noisy negroes swarmed into the grove and swept it clean with cyclonic rapidity. Every tree showed a visible ladder and owned an invisible blackbird, who, with a canvas bag around his neck and curved clippers in his claws, fought through thorns for the fruit and got every last one. This picking is a fine art. Not everybody with a ladder and shears can gather oranges for the market, for unless an orange shows a rudiment of a stem it is a cull, and if it shows more than a rudiment of a stem it is also a cull, the idea being that no stem makes a rotting spot and too much stem makes a dangerous spear.

The grove under invasion was very interesting to Laurie, who spent every minute she could spare in listening to the songs of the pickers. One moment the grove would be as silent as a primeval forest, then a hidden blackbird would boom out,

"Rock me in de ebberlastin' arms, brudders!"

And immediately the place became a grand choir of song in an anthem of real sublimity. From one group of trees would issue the plaintive wail "Rock me!" then another group of trees, tenor this time, would continue, "Rock me!" and lastly the whole would unite in a mighty chorus of religious frenzy:

"Rock me in de ebberlasting arms ob Jesus,
And Ah won't feel any danger ob de earth or ob de deep.
Rock me in de ebberlasting arms ob Jesus,
And Ah'm ready, Lord, at any time to fall asleep!"

Or if it wasn't religion that kept them occupied it was repartee. For something very choice would issue from the heart of a tree, and then an earth-shaking guffaw of laughter would rise up on every side.

It was really lonely after they were gone. And the trees looked as ragged and limp and denuded of riches as if they had been dragged through the proverbial knothole, taking several days to erect their branches and straighten out their disarranged leaves, preparatory to the great business of putting on new bloom.

For a citrus tree keeps busy all the time, and February is its rush season. February in Florida is as near heaven as can be imagined. The air is perpetually drenched with hidden sweetness of newborn blossoms, and the earth is a solid blue carpet of long-stemmed violets, pale things of such exquisite beauty that one forgives them for being scentless. But such forgiveness does not need to be extended to the wild pawpaw, surely the most odorous shrub that ever covered a county with white loveliness and subtle perfume! And the generous extravagance of it! One does not have to search for the wild pawpaw, for it is everywhere, by roadsides and in pine forests, by the kitchen door or on the far margins of lakes, freely breathing out its magnolia essences by day and night, converting barren fields into royal conservatories of bloom.

It was on one of the most perfect of these perfect days that Mr. Herman Selig arrived at McAllister's grove to settle. And, claiming the right he had bargained for, Charles Roycroft made a third party at

the business interview. The three of them were at—or rather in—Laurie's front gate—a hospitable resting place with a roof on stilts, and furnished with rustic seats, these last being of great convenience to the ants and roaches.

"Mr. Selig, I suppose you know that oranges are selling in New York for four dollars a box, and in Chicago for four ninety?" was Roycroft's pointed beginning.

"So?" asked the Jew, with a shrug of his round shoulders. He hunted for the least knotty portion of the rustic bench, found it, sat down, and began rolling his invisible dough-ball between his palms. "But the young lady signed for sixty cents," he concluded, grunting it out firmly.

He was so bristly of chin and so small eyed as to look tremendously like a wild boar. Still rolling his dough-ball he darted a glance from the angry young man to the prettily embarrassed girl, evidently linking them together as partners in a planned attack, and ready to rout both of them with his documentary evidence.

"Mr. Selig is quite right. I did sign for sixty cents," said the girl frankly.

This free admission obviously surprised the money lender. He had not been looking for it. It made matters easier than he expected.

"You see," he remarked, addressing Roycroft ironically.

"That was when fruit promised to glut the market," said Roycroft, growing hotter with indignation. "If you hold Miss McAllister to such a contract it will be robbery!"

"Will be . . . say id again."

"Robbery."

"There is such a thing as suit for libel," then remarked Selig calmly.

"I care nothing for that," said Roycroft. "What I am talking of now is the price of oranges, and I repeat it would be robbery to hold Miss McAllister to her contract. Inasmuch as I recommended you to her, I feel responsible, and cannot stand quietly by and see her cheated."

"Say id again," demanded Selig as unctuously as if requiring encore for a delicious strain of music.

"Cheated," repeated Roycroft clearly.

"Perhaps the young lady has something to say for herself," suggested the Jew, turning his beads of eyes upon her and rolling his dough-ball very stealthily.

"Do, Miss Laurie," said Roycroft. "I entreat of you to stand up for your rights."

"I would if I had any to stand up for, but I haven't," she admitted. "I wouldn't back out of a contract for anything in the world. When I signed for sixty cents I did it without any urging, and moreover was awfully glad of the chance. Of course I'd just love to get more money—goodness knows I need it badly enough—but I haven't a shred of a right to expect it. And please don't blame yourself, Mr. Roycroft, and please don't blame Mr. Selig, for I, who am most concerned, don't blame him in the least. He took a chance, just as I did, and he has come out on top fairly."

"Can you say 'fairly,'" asked Roycroft, in a gallop, "when he is paying you sixty cents for what he cannot buy elsewhere for five dollars? When the quarantine against canker and the recent freeze have shortened the market till fruit is worth its weight in gold? And you say 'fairly'!"

"And I really mean it, Mr. Roycroft," she put in gently. "For Mr. Selig didn't know these things any more than you or I did at the time he had me sign. I don't think there is anything to be gained by arguing further."

"Nothing at all," agreed the Jew.

"So if you will tell me what is due me, Mr. Selig——"

"At sixty cents the box?" he asked, flinging away his dough-ball and getting ready to dive into one of his lock-box pockets.

"Yes. It is about two hundred and fifty dollars, isn't it?"

"I refuse to witness the proceedings," said Roycroft, done with the pair of them.

He flung open the gate, banged it shut, and walked off. Selig looked after him with a half smile on his unshaven thin lips.

"A puppy," remarked the Hebrew softly. "Well-born and valuable, but young yet."

By the time he had extracted from his pocket a check, which he surveyed a moment and then tore into incredibly fine scraps, dropping them to the ground and rubbing them into the soil with his heel. He then handed Laurie a second one, which she took and read disbelievingly aloud.

"This is made out for eight hundred and seventy-five dollars and fifty cents," she said, getting ready to hand it back.

"Eight hundred and seventy-five dollars and fifty cents," said Selig, checking the figures off from an account book of his own. "Right."

"What for? And for whom?" she demanded blankly. She fingered the check as fearfully as though it were

a lighted bomb due to explode and destroy her. That much wealth was liable to go off at any minute.

"You. Fruit," answered the Jew, briefly. He turned his book for her to see the account for herself, though she was too dizzy with delight to do any adding.

"But I had only four hundred and sixty-two grove boxes," she reminded him.

"Well," he growled, tapping a number with his blunt pencil. "Ain't that it?" Then he dropped his pretense of being a boar and said quite pleasantly, "I am paying you two dollars a box, Miss Laurie McAllister, though I would have held you fast to your contract had you tried to break it."

"And I can pay you the mortgage money and still have over seven hundred dollars left?" she asked, flushing quickly. "Oh, how that mortgage has worried me!"

He gave a grunting chuckle and scraped his bristles with his four fingers.

"Are you a fool, huh?" he asked softly. "Thinking I could hold you on a piece of paper like that, unwitnessed, unrecorded? I destroyed it that night."

"Destroyed it?" she asked, viewing him timidly and wonderingly, beginning to feel that she was entertaining an angel unawares, and an angel in the sufficient disguise of a long, shabby, faded overcoat, a dented Derby hat, and all the facial lines that a superficial observer would consider the lines of cupidity and cruelty when they were mostly the lines of caution and self protection.

"Destroyed it," he replied. "But I had your promise you would pay. I knew that was enough. I go by the voice. Your voice is the honest one."

"What makes you so good to me?" she faltered, up-

set. "Won't you please let me shake hands? Thank you. Why are you so good to me?"

"Because it is a hard world for a pretty girl," he answered, gazing almost vacantly away from her. He stood up to go, and put his hand upon the latch of the gate. "I was sorry for you from the first—you so young and with an old man to keep. Brave you were and innocent, *too* innocent, asking *me* to advise you! You were poor, but you did not cringe before me; you did not despise me—as most borrowers are pleased to despise the usurer!—you trusted me. So what was there to do but to prove myself as honorable as you thought me?"

"So it *is* all mine," she cried, at last daring to believe it. "You are sure you haven't cheated yourself?"

"I would be the first Selig to do *that*," he remarked grimly, and went.

"If he did not deserve my doubts then, he will later," remarked Roycroft quite callously when Laurie cornered him in her grove and scored him. "And if you are so jubilant over a beastly seven hundred dollars, what won't you say to *my* piece of news?"

"More good luck?" she asked radiantly.

"Rather! The railroad is going to run in a track and put up a station."

"The noisy thing!" she remarked indifferently.

"Wake up, Miss Laurie, wake up," he urged beseechingly. "Can't you see what that means? First a station, then a store, then an hotel, then a church, then a school, then concrete pavements, an electric plant, an ice factory, lastly a little town. Don't look so unbelieving. I myself have watched the thing

actually happen in Florida almost in a night. You will be able to sell your land for thousands."

"Sell?" she asked, quite derisively. "And where would I go if I sold?"

On the point of giving a practical reply he caught a golden shaft of suggestion from the goddess of his destiny. He reddened, braced himself, and pointed in the direction where lay his own beautiful home waiting for its queen mistress.

"To me," he answered quickly. "The whole song has come true:

"For bonnie Annie Laurie I wad lay me doon and dee!"

So wide-eyed and startled that she was mystically pretty she backed away from him, backed into an orange tree and stood there in a bower of white buds and blossoms. They caught in her bright hair, they brushed her flushed cheeks, and with every move of the faint breeze they filled the gentle air with that essence of romance and love that is the perfumed soul of the orange flower.

And from a near green bough sang the nightingale of the south, the joyous mocking bird whose melody is pure gladness, owning no minor notes. When you hear it you have the feeling that something very happy has happened in the world, and that your full share is winging its way to you.

"Laurie, don't say no to me," begged Roycroft. "I know you don't care for me—you have shown that from the first—but I—I have loved you from the first."

"You—you have kept very quiet about it," she said, rather wildly. It was news to her to learn that she disliked him.

"I have tried to speak, but you have laughed at me. If you could but know how I have longed for you —at evening—when the moon is bright upon the lake."

"Only then?" she asked.

"Always! But I never knew the *madness* of love until that night when you sang the song that has my name in it. The love in your voice came to me, touched me, kissed me!"

"Oh, don't!" she begged. "The Charlie I was singing about was the prince."

"But you *thought* of me!"

"I did not!" she denied vehemently. "How did you guess it?" Then, hurriedly, "Don't come near me, please. Please! I want to ask you something. But you didn't care for me when I sang! You just turned around and walked away."

"If I had not," he said tumultuously, "I might have—"

He made an illustrative step.

"But you mustn't!" she cried affrightedly, waving him off.

He stopped short, hurt, bewildered.

"You always do that," he cried. "Always! You lure me on step by step, only to slap me in the face!"

"Oh, I never did that, Mr. Roycroft!" she exclaimed, growing astonishingly crimson, and adding meekly, "When?"

"The time those men, O'Connell and the rest, frightened you. After they had gone, you stood before me so small, so shaken, that I . . . oh, I cannot tell you, Laurie! But I would have given the world to be able to put my arms around you, hold you, love you."

"Then why didn't you?" she asked, almost accusingly.

"Take advantage of the fright and loneliness of an

unprotected girl that trusted me?" he asked hotly. "What do you think of me?"

"I'm not saying," she murmured.

"That night I asked your grandfather's permission to—to be your suitor, Laurie."

"What had grandfather to do with it?" she asked imperiously. "I was the one! Let me tell you something right now—I can worry along beautifully without too much chivalry!"

But her heart was leaping with ecstatic joy to remember that this loyal knight had always guarded her as a queen.

"Oh, Laurie, refuse me if you must, but don't laugh at me *now*. Try to guess what I would say. Be a little sorry for my dumbness, for I own no eloquence. I can only love you, dear, and live for you, and battle for you. I need you so. I tried to tell you on Christmas day when you blessed my lonely home with your bright presence, but you saw it coming, and you were cold to me."

"I didn't see it coming," she half sobbed. "I thought I saw it going!"

"I never understand you, Laurie," he said, making a step towards her, then pausing, with his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. "Does it mean that you——"

"It means that I am so happy I don't know what to do or say or think. I just want to cry for a little while—hard."

"Then come to me, even to cry," he said, taking her in his arms.

"Now that I'm here I don't want to cry," she discovered presently.

"I'd like to ask you something, Mr. Roycroft."

"Charles."

"I can't; not all at once," she stammered. "But—that night you set your fields on fire for me——"

"That night you set my heart on fire for you," he corrected.

"And you said I looked lonely and tired, what was the fifth thing?"

"Beautiful."

She sighed contentedly. Then she took his hand in both of hers and said, "Be quiet for a little moment. I am going to pray. Going to pray that I may be all to you that you need and hope. Going to pray God to keep my fire in your heart forever and forever alive."